

A woman with long dark hair is shown in silhouette, holding a handgun up to her eye as if aiming. She is wearing a dark, long-sleeved top. The background is a dramatic sunset or sunrise with a sky of orange, red, and yellow clouds. The overall mood is intense and action-oriented.

A.W. KAYLEN

HEATHER CHASE FBI SERIES

DIRT
DEALERS

Dirt Dealers

Heather Chase FBI Series

A.W. Kaylen

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Chapter 1

The world is an ant farm, someone once told her. It's layer upon layer of dirt and swarming with things trying to eat your lunch.

Looking up at the hundred-plus stories of dull concrete and gleaming glass looming over her, that's the line Heather Chase kept thinking of. It had taken only ten minutes to get here but it would take forever to ride up in the elevator. It meant getting in a tiny steel box and pushing the swirling fear away. It meant enduring, closing her eyes, and counting to a hundred, waiting, squashed in among all those people, breathing, not breathing, trying to breathe. Clinging to life. She'd done a lot of that in her youth. She was doing it again as an adult.

And she was barely standing by the time the elevator pinged open on the sixty-first floor.

"Are you coming?" ASAC Hogan asked her, walking ahead. "Are you ready?"

She nodded to her superior. It was a yes to the first question. As for the second, she wasn't so sure.

"This'll be a big deal for you, you know," Hogan was saying, his towering six feet of meat leading her down the springy blue carpet, across the lobby, and down a wide hallway lined with office spaces behind floor-to-ceiling windows. "You've been out of Quantico what, a year now? Still twenty-nine years old." He was saying, half-impressed, half-blowing smoke. "This case could boost your career from the get go."

She should be thankful, was what he was really saying, ASAC Hogan with the straight, strong gait. ASAC Hogan who used too much cologne and whose Calvin Klein vapors had made the elevator ride up even more suffocating than it already was. He turned back to look at her after she didn't answer him right away and his eyes were big and calculating, his chin like a stone mallet.

"I understand," Chase said, her voice coming out at a strange tenor. "I understood that when you came down here with me personally."

"Oh yeah?" Hogan said, a sly smile plastered on that big square jaw. Maybe he

was testing her. Was this whole thing another test? Bringing her down here?

"I mean, your job is to run the Field Office downtown," Chase continued. "It's not to come solve cases, at least not regular murders."

"And that tells you what?"

"That it's not a regular murder?"

"Ding ding ding," Hogan said, grinning.

But what it really told her was that maybe Hogan wanted to play mentor and get her on the straight and narrow track of by-the-book law enforcement. Just like the other blowhards she'd been partnered with after starting at the FBI's New York Field Office a year prior, all those partners with whom she never got anywhere, simply because she didn't work the same way they did. Couldn't work the case their way because she wasn't wired up like everyone else. They didn't like that.

Hogan forced out a stiff, booming laugh, seemingly at nothing. "It also means we can't screw the pooch on this one, Chase."

"Then why bring a newbie like me along?" She said, catching her reflection in the big glass wall separating them from the inside—her own brown eyes looked back at her from out a pale, small face, her dark auburn hair tied back in a ponytail, her lean 5'9" body in a charcoal pantsuit and white shirt under the blue FBI jacket. She looked miniscule in comparison to the bulk of Hogan beside her. Through her reflection and behind the glass lay the crime scene.

...The crime scene which, without a doubt, was Hogan's real point in bringing her down here, Chase suddenly realized, the lurking nausea of the elevator nightmare fading out and a new swirling fear cresting over her the moment she saw the body. Then everything else out there ceased to exist. There was just pallid skin tinted blue and pulled tight as a drum over a still head, a mouth hanging open like a door someone forgot to close. The milling cops in the area melted away and the fact she was in an office did too. The ceiling came off and the walls fell down and each step closer to the corpse was made automatic, without her input or control, and the black kiss of permanent darkness danced within. She knew in that instant he'd been innocent, a victim, that man who was now blue. She knew there'd been somebody wronged. The last expression frozen on his face said it all: *Unjust*.

He certainly hadn't starved to death, a gut bulging in his dress shirt over a tight belt, the cheeks in that blue face bloated like a squirrel's. Looked like he had thyroid issues, although that didn't explain his giant forehead that rose up to a receding hairline of light reddish hair. A similar reddish smear of a mustache. And a big reddish smear on the floor under him where his left lung had been punctured by... An eight-inch hunting knife, the NYPD forensic tech Kawasaki was saying... Which is how he'd drowned on his own blood. The time was currently 9:36 a.m. which, judging from rigor and the body's color, put the kill at the previous evening. Forensics confirmed. But those were just details, just logical facts. That wasn't what had really gone down here. It wasn't the burning power that surged through the killer the moment the blade went into his victim, Clyde Yates, nor the impossible fear that Yates had felt upon realizing he wasn't going to make it.

He'd suffered for a while, the splatter pattern showed it. He'd tried to keep the blood in by the looks of his palms. It hadn't worked; the cut had been too deep, too wide, too devastatingly effective. It was almost a professional job. The killer had wiped their blade, slipped it casually in its sheath, and strolled out of the building like nothing had happened. Just another day at the office.

"Just another day killing your coworkers," Chase muttered.

"What was that?" Hogan asked, she could smell his presence somewhere in her vicinity.

"Who else was in here last night?" Chase asked the cops standing around. She was still hunched down by the stiff. Behind Hogan stood a couple of NYPD detectives who quit their banter to answer her—they were typical Homicide types, that beady seen-it-all look in their eyes, powdered sugar stuck to their lapels. New York brass, only the finest.

"Well, we're still canvassing," one of the dicks said, the alpha of the pair, so probably detective first degree. He was short and on the later side of forty, salt and pepper in his hair, thin brows on a diamond-shape face, a mustache of hard black bristles.

"Thank you detective—"

"Navarro."

"I'm Special Agent Chase. This place has to be riddled with cameras, right?" She

said, half to the detective, half to the body on the floor. "Plus there's the turnstile at the lobby. One plus one is two—it's got to be an inside job."

Navarro simply looked at her with two thin brows angled up toward the middle of his potato-shaped head, his chunky lips parting slightly open as if to speak but not finding the words.

"What, uh, what makes you say that though?" The other detective, Dougherty, asked. This one had a softer face, squinty Irish eyes, and a wave of ruddy blonde hair set in a boyish style. He was no newbie either, but his demeanor suggested less street time than his partner.

"Come on," Chase replied. "You're both Ninth Precinct boys—that makes your beat Noho to Alphabet City. I'm betting you handle white collar crime all the time. You should be used to how these things work by now: It's going to wind up to some conflict over money, promotion, betrayal. Maybe a disagreement over the company's future that escalated, given Yates was management. Anyway you shake it, the killer's close to the victim."

"Whoa, there," Navarro said, his thin brows now twisted into a cross-stitch. "You wanna hold your horses there a second, Agent? You barely just seen the body, now you're hi-ho silver all the way to the conclusion?" He shook his head, gave her a tut-tut. "That's not how police work goes, honey."

"Then it's just as well I don't work for the police," Chase returned icily, holding her gaze on Navarro's bleary dark brown eyes. "And I'm not your honey, your cutie, your sweetie, or your sugar pie—so put your knife and fork away."

"Listen," Navarro said grimacing, "you're a toe-stepper, I can see that. But guess what? The people who work at this company aren't making Subway sandwiches over here. They're high profile, no rinky dink operation you're dealing with. And they're not gonna take particularly lightly to that attitude."

"Alright, alright," Hogan said, stepping in. "Let's be cordial, shall we? We're all trying to get to the bottom of this—"

"Sure," Navarro said. "You just better tell your agent there not to put her foot in her mouth in a way she might regret later down the line."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Chase said.

Hogan licked his lips and put on his best professional smile. "I've been meaning to tell you about that, Chase. AxeS isn't just your regular private firm."

She felt her blood pressure dropping. Here we go again with the red tape. She had been waiting for it the whole way down here in fact. There was always a catch. Some little nagging condition that would put her entire investigation on egg shells.

"So, what are they then?"

"Well—"

The glass doors at the end of the room swung open at that moment and a man briskly walked in—a hot shot, you could just tell—followed closely behind him was a girl, likely his assistant, desperately trying to keep pace while also holding a stack of papers and a venti cup, her heels clopping rapidly over the carpet.

"That's the president of the company," Hogan whispered to her. "Kody Meachum." The man was tallish, though not as tall as Hogan—blonde close-cropped hair and a deceptively youthful face, bright blue eyes, a smile as fake as decal lips on a rubber sex doll. He wore a white button down with the top button open and the collar raised over a casual dark blue Armani suit. It was trying desperately hard to look casual, but Chase put the price of the ensemble well into the thousands of dollars. The man walked up to them and aggressively shook each of their hands, showing off his expert dentistry all the while. When it came Chase's turn to shake, the moment she felt that slimy reptile skin cross her palm she wanted to gag—it was frigid, just like everything else about him. He smelled of money, a dirty, cold smell that wafted up into her airways and sent a glancing shiver down her spine. Coupled with the unsmiling blue eyes that seemed to look through her and Chase had basically made up her mind she wasn't going to like this guy. Simply put, he was a douchebag yuppie.

"Hello, everyone," Meachum said. "I'm glad you're all here. This is—" he glanced at the body, "such an unfortunate and terrible affair and it's regrettable that something like this has happened to one of our best staff."

Regrettable. Best staff. This guy spoke in PR statements. He'd internalized the spin. His main priority was not letting this turn into a scandal—he didn't give a damn about the fact one of his colleagues had been brutally stabbed and left to bleed out on the carpet. He probably cared more about replacing the carpet.

"Mr. Meachum," Chase said, "where were you yesterday evening from the hours of around eight to eleven p.m.?"

The room froze. She could feel the burning eyes of two NYPD cops and one FBI Assistant Special Agent in Charge on her forehead like red sniper dots.

"Chase," Hogan said warningly. Meanwhile, Meachum's beefcake bodyguard had taken an extra step forward.

"Step back from Mr. Meachum," the bodyguard said in a scratched voice like he had a sore throat.

What was he gonna do, throw her out? The bodyguard had arms bigger than Donkey Kong and a visible vein that pumped a whole pipeline of blood up into his meathead, and he barely fit into his XXL sports coat which physically was threatening, but so what? She wasn't any riff raff off the street. She was FBI, damnit. So, she didn't care when said beefcake narrowly stared her down with his hard penetrating gaze or barked at her in his broken voice. She needed to be here for this. This Meachum was a slippery toad and she could sense he was going to disappear behind the I'm-busy-right-now veil that all these types used as cover. If she was going to get any leads from him it had to be right here, right now. Regardless of how uncomfortable it made the others in the room.

"Oh, that's quite alright," Meachum said, gesturing to his bodyguard to back down, his voice turning one notch more professional. His voice had been notched up on the private school eloquence scale so hard it almost sounded British by this point. "I'm perfectly willing to cooperate, anything I can do to help you find the killer." He beamed again—Chase put each tooth at around \$5,000 a piece. If she smacked him in the face, for example, it would be equivalent to beating up an Aston Martin. The thought was enticing, though she'd have to attack him a different way.

"So," Chase said. "I assume you've got an alibi for that duration?"

Meachum smiled even harder. "Of course I do, agent. The truth is I rarely get a moment to myself—although one supposes that may prove useful this time around."

"I'm sure it will," Chase said. "What time did you leave the office?"

"Six—no, seven. I remember because I had a conference call with Washington."

Another smile, this one accompanied by a flash in his crystal blue eyes. It was a cunning flash—one which dared her to ask what she now had to ask.

"As in D.C.?" She asked.

"Precisely."

Chase licked her lips, just barely glanced at Hogan, on whose face it was all written. *Not just any rinky dink private firm*—Navarro's words repeated themselves in her head.

"You're working with the government. Directly with them."

Meachum's smile grew to the length of his face. She felt like she was going to be swallowed by an alligator. "Indeed," he said. "Which is why you good folks from the Bureau are here, presumably. You see that's the other thing—it wasn't just a murder that transpired last night."

Chase blinked twice and turned to Hogan, but he seemed equally unaware of this development.

"Not just a murder?" Chase said. "What do you mean by that?"

"You see," Meachum said, his face clouding over. "We've also been robbed."

Chapter 2

They all entered into another office, leaving the dead man to the capable rubber-gloved hands of Kawasaki from forensics. They didn't have to cram into the office. Meachum's wide glass-walled room boasted a good 80 feet across, its South-facing windows looking out on the Manhattan skyline. Draped in sunlight, Meachum's blonde hair glowed and gave the impression that he was from another plane. A celestial being, above it all. That was probably intentional. But when it came down to it he was flesh and blood. It could have just as easily been *his* lungs on the other side of that blade.

"I'm sure you've checked the security footage by now," Meachum was saying. He sat down on his high-backed black leather chair, not asking his guests to sit since there weren't even enough seats in the room to hold them. The four of them just stood in front of his desk like subordinates. That was probably intentional too.

"We checked the tapes briefly," Detective Navarro said in his gruff voice, a voice cracked from years of shouting at perps on the street then yelling at his TV set when he got home. "We don't have anything definite on this side of the building, but we do got a few suspects already. Anyone who was in the office building at the time of the murder. We're still uh—still looking at tracking them down."

Meachum slipped on a poker face and shrugged. It sounded like a dead end to Chase. She decided to follow it up with a one-two. "About this stolen item," she said, interrupting the useless train of conversation.

Meachum smiled softly and turned in his seat to face her. "Yes?"

"Well, aren't you going to tell us what was stolen?"

"Important... Documents."

"Documents."

"Yes."

"Documents about what?"

"I'm afraid that's classified."

"Then how are we supposed to—" Chase felt Hogan's thick hand landing on her shoulder. Geez, she thought. If she's not even allowed to ask questions, what's the point of bringing her down here at all?

"Okay," Chase said, changing tack. "Who was Clyde Yates to you? Were you friends?"

"We worked together very closely. He advised the company on many... Matters. Thanks to him we were able to gain the contracts we did at just the right time, elevating us quickly up the ladder of success."

He was talking without saying anything. Chase's number one pet peeve. She clenched her fist and forced herself to reply calmly. "He was an advisor," she said. Meachum didn't reply. "It would help, Mr. Meachum, if we could get a basic idea of what you were working on. Doesn't have to be too detailed, just something to help us get a picture of what the killer's motive might be."

"Yes, I see. Well, there's no easy way to describe it without going into detail."

"Try."

"We act as a conduit, if you will. A bridge between government and privatized industry."

"What kind?" Chase asked.

"Telecommunications, mostly. Sometimes the media."

"What do you mean by a bridge? What exactly is it you *do*?"

He shrugged, almost apathetically, like it had nothing to do with him and it was up to him whether or not to indulge their questions. Chase imagined herself pushing away from Hogan, from the two detectives beside her. She felt herself raising her hand and slamming it down on Meachum's thick walnut desk and grabbing him up by his Armani shirt lapels. She felt herself pulling his mouth open and yanking out his precious teeth one by one until he talked...

"Look, Mr. Meachum, this is a murder case here. That means you're not just a witness, you and everyone near Yates is a suspect. Now you're gonna cooperate one way or another."

Meachum opened his mouth slightly, feigning surprise. "My, my. Is this really necessary?" He shot a look over to Hogan. But Hogan said nothing and Chase took that as her cue to continue.

"The killer knifed Yates to get to these stolen documents, correct?" Chase asked.

"That's a likely scenario."

"And these documents, they contain government secrets?"

"You could say that, yes."

"Cut the crap. Either they do or they don't."

"Now just hold on a minute," Navarro said, his hands on his hips. Chase shot a glance back to catch a bright red and fuming detective. "Who do you feds think you are, talking to Mr. Meachum like that?"

"Butt out, Detective. You'll get your chance to cross-examine the suspect with kid gloves later. Why don't you go and buy yourself a donut. Or a box of them."

"What the—what the hell did you just say to me?"

"Hold on," Detective Dougherty said. "Mr. Meachum can't be a suspect—he has an alibi and he has no motive to steal his own documents."

"I'm telling you *everyone* is a suspect," Chase said. "Until proven otherwise." She turned to Meachum again, who, seeing that his usual tactic of controlling the conversation wasn't working, had become slightly unnerved. His face was still locked in fake smile rictus, but his forehead glistened with the truth. The pressure was working on him. "Now—about these documents."

"Fine, they held government secrets," he said, this time easily.

"About what? The media? This about government propaganda or something?"

The alligator smile came back. "I'm afraid I really can't get into the weeds with you about that. But you're incorrect."

"Then I'll put it this way—why would someone steal the documents? Are they worth a lot of money?"

Meachum seemed to ponder that one a while, his eyes darting back and forth. But it wasn't like he was trying to remember—it was more like he was trying to

come up with something. Frankly, his whole demeanor stunk like yesterday's tuna fish sandwich.

"I suppose they could be sold to the right person for the right price," he finally said, evasively.

Chase threw her hands up. "Forget it. Here," she said to the two NYPD. "You two can play pussy foot with him all you like." She made for the door.

"Where are you going, Agent Chase?" Hogan asked as she headed out the room.

"Going back to the body. He's going to tell me a lot more than Mr. Meachum here."

Hogan just smiled awkwardly at the other three in the room, gave a slight shrug. "What can I tell you, she's spirited and young."

Meachum muttered something in sly tones and they all laughed. Chase didn't care. Screw them. She was going to do this her way. That was how she'd solved her last three cases—not by running down every dead end and jumping into every pitfall thrown her way by the careermen cops and lying suspects around her—but by getting to the heart of the matter. If Hogan brought her down here, he had to understand that too.

Maybe she could piece together herself what the documents were about. Although it was hard to find something when you didn't even know what the hell it was. What she needed was a good lead that would tell her more details about what went on at this company. But she'd search for them afterwards. She had one more thing to do here first.

The forensics had bagged and tagged all they were going to find, and now they were just waiting on transport to the coroner's office. That was good. That left the body free. The Ninth Precinct cops began drifting out of the room and gathered in the open plan office—which had been emptied for them—and spoke in low voices about their personal gripes. Meanwhile, Chase snuck back into the scene.

The scene where it all happened. She looked down at the red haired man with the big potato head lying stiff on the ground.

"You were in the wrong place at the wrong time," Chase muttered. "Why'd you

have to die?"

Yates didn't strike her as the type to defend something to the death. Not that he should strike her as anything—he was dead. But just the feeling she got from him was disheveled, somewhat frenetic, haphazard even. Someone barely keeping their head above water. He didn't give her the feeling of someone who gave 100% to his job, let alone putting it above his own life. It wasn't an argument leading to death, she felt. It was more one-sided. Clyde Yates hadn't seen it coming at all.

It would help if she even knew what was so important someone pulled off such a brazen stunt to obtain it—if indeed this was about the documents. She gazed out the sun-filtered window, this one facing East on a crummy section of Bowery. Cars below shuffled about like ants, taxis picking up and dropping their fares, pedestrians scurrying across the road. People trading in their precious hours every day to keep holding on, to wish for better means, to make ends meet, to passively drift through their one life on a tide of bustling chrome, light, and exhaust.

She laid down beside the body and breathed, and breathed.

What was so important? If she knew that, she could solve this whole case. The conviction had already developed inside her.

That was when she felt the deep and terrible pain inside her chest. Her eyes flashed open in an instant and she turned to Yates—saw the crimson slit, vertically stabbed in his chest. Stabbed, not slashed. The knife had gone in with one smooth motion. She bolted upright, dashed out of the room to Kawasaki, a small man with neat features and intelligent, unmoving eyes behind round glasses; a shaggy bowl cut took the edge off what would ordinarily be an imposing face.

"It was you who examined the fatal wound?" She asked him.

"Yes, it was."

"There was just one wound, wasn't there?"

"Correct. The blade was inserted once."

"The killer managed to stab Yates—through the chest—in one blow?"

He nodded emotionlessly. The other techs on scene looked over but said nothing.

"Hello?" Chase said, her voice tightening. "Doesn't anyone find that strange?"

Chase continued, "You know how hard it is to stab someone through the rib cage? You can stab a dozen times and it won't work."

"Well yeah, that is true," ASAC Hogan said, appearing out of nowhere. He stayed behind her and froze into a statue, not saying anything for a while.

"This had to be some kind of powerhouse of a man," Chase said, and then faltered. She bit her lip. It meant Meachum wasn't the killer. "Damn it," she breathed.

"Yes, your analysis is correct," the forensic expert said dispassionately. "One fatal injury delivered right through the rib cage—either the murderer was extremely lucky or extremely skilled."

"Christ," Chase said. "This is a professional job."

"Makes sense, doesn't it?" Hogan said. "If they came for the documents."

"I'm still not so sure about that," Chase said. "Something tells me we're not getting the full story. And someone around here knows it. Which is why I'm going to track them down and make them squawk."

"Uh, before that, Chase."

"Yes?" She said impatiently, expecting more red tape.

"You might want to grab a change of clothes..."

He pointed at the back of her suit jacket. She examined it in the glass window: Yates' blood had seeped into it in a deep purple splotch.

She wondered if she could get it dry cleaned.

Chapter 3

Since there was only one copy of the security footage and it was currently in the hands of the NYPD, Chase was forced to take a little trip downtown with the two detectives. It got her away from Hogan's cologne for long enough to think at least. His entire aura always dictated a set of unspoken conditions that she could care less about; let him handle the politics of AxeS's connections. It was her job to find the killer, wasn't it? And while it felt a little like attending a party as someone's date and going home with someone else, it was clear Chase would get more from the PD at this stage than her own Bureau.

The cop shop on East Fifth was snuggled between a row of five-story apartment buildings, the street itself cramped in with parked cars lining both sides and big japonicas whose leafless branches coated the narrow street in a blanket of tangled shadows despite it being mid morning. A pasta restaurant named Risotteria on one side and a hairdressers named Giorgina's on the other reminded you that you were only a hop skip and a jump away from Little Italy.

"How long have you been working with the Bureau, Agent?" Dougherty was asking her.

"Hmm?"

"I asked how long have you been a spook."

"I'm not a spy, Detective. I'm law enforcement, same as you."

"Oh yeah, sure. Course."

"I've been with them nearly a year now."

"Nearly a—" he traded looks with his partner, who seemed mildly disinterested as he muttered under his breath, winding through the dense array of cars looking for a spot. The parking spaces in front of the small precinct were already taken up by several of the white-with-blue-stripe compact SUVs labeled 9 PCT. The new models looked aesthetically butt-ugly but Chase knew they could tear up the road when they had to.

"You trying to tell me you're a greenhorn?" Dougherty said.

"No, that's not what I'm trying to tell you, Detective. Before I officially worked at the New York Field Office I did three years at Quantico."

"So, what?" Navarro cut in. "I went through police academy like anyone, didn't mean when I came out I wasn't green as a baby bird."

"Are you trying to imply that I'm not up to the job?" Chase said, a pulse of anger twisting up through the shimmering purple haze that Clyde Yates' body had thrown her in. It made her lose the trail, and the realization made the anger spread even more.

"No, no," Dougherty corrected. "He ain't saying that either."

"I'm saying it," Navarro said, finally finding an empty spot and pulling into it, only to be cut off at the last second by a red Camaro.

"Mother F—" he yelled.

"Well lookit," Dougherty said, making a conciliatory gesture. "New York is no picnic, is what we mean. Nothing's ever open and shut, and whatever it is you think you've grasped at this juncture, it'll end up there's a dozen different layers behind it."

"That much, I've figured," Chase said flatly.

"Listen, 'cause this is some pretty good advice," Dougherty said. "In fact, I wish I'd heard it when I was starting out, would have got me on the right page a lot sooner. I was spinning my wheels for two, three years before I caught on to the way it worked."

"Why don't you enlighten me?" Chase said, folding her arms and not exactly on board for being condescended to by some donut-snarfer, but still curious about what he meant. She sucked back the frustration and let herself relax against the hard plastic of the squad car seat while Navarro attempted to park for the third time.

"I'm talking about—whatcha call it—the power structures that govern this place."

"Like the mayor, the DA's office?"

"I'm talking about the underground. So, let me give it to you straight. To the

West over in Jersey you got Don Vigotti—the last of the surviving Families, right? Well, he de facto lords over half the organized crime in Lower Manhattan—certainly Little Italy, and in fact a good chunk of Chinatown too. Except in C-town it's not so simple either. They may keep their heads down and pretend like nothings going on, but in the shadows they're still *Tonged* up the wazoo."

"Tongs?" Chase said incredulously. "As in the Hip Sing Tong? What kind of fantasy is this?"

"No fantasy," Navarro added, "there's cast-offs from the Hip Sing all over. A shadow of it all over C-town—and they don't particularly like Vigotti that much. There are other tongs too. Who knows how many. Flushing, Queens, for example."

"The White Tigers now? Mob Families and the Triads," Chase muttered. "I thought you were going to give me some real advice, not urban legends from two decades ago. What's next, Detective, you're gonna tell me to put blinker fluid in my patrol car?"

"We're not hazing you, Agent," Dougherty said, holding onto the handle on the roof as Navarro jerked the car into park. "Naturally, things don't work the way they used to. I mean used to be that New York was divvied up to a bunch of small players—the Dragons, the Tigers, and whatever the heck, then Vigotti, DeMarco, Romano fighting over the scraps of Little Italy and Jersey. And then on top of that you got the Polacks and Serbs down in Brooklyn, the hardcore types who'd walk around with assault rifles and grenade launchers and whatever you like. I mean this place used to be a warzone until Guiliani..."

"Okay, thanks for the history lesson, Detective, but what's that got to do with the present day?"

"Well see that's the thing—in a city like this one, nothin' really just *goes* away now, does it?"

"I don't know, doesn't it?"

"It just hides itself away," Navarro said. "Morphs into something else, becomes more complicated, more difficult to nail down."

"Which is why we're telling you this for your own good," Dougherty went on, "since I been through this circus more than a couple times now. You fed types

come in clodhopping around, expect things to be clear cut. Throw your weight around pointing the finger. End up fingering the wrong perp, the whole case goes FUBAR. I seen it happen, Agent. I seen it happen a couple times now. Fact is you have to take the whole city into consideration..."

"Then who's North?" Chase asked flatly.

"Beg your pardon?"

"If Vigotti is to the West, the Tongs are to the East, the Eastern euro gangs are to the South, then who rules the North?"

"The North is Harlem, lady, no one rules it." Navarro said.

"But what about the Bronx?"

"Okay, the Bronx is kinda... I don't know exactly. From there up to Poughkeepsie is all kind of a black box. Wouldn't surprise me if Osama Bin Laden was up there hiding in the dirt."

"Let's just keep our focus down here, in our own precinct," Dougherty said.

"But you just said to take the whole city into consideration. So, what are you thinking exactly? That AxeS, a private company with D.C. connections, is also in bed with the underworld?"

"Uh—I never said that at all, Agent," Dougherty stammered.

"They'd have to have gone through all kinds of hoops, background checks," Chase thought out loud. "If Clyde Yates had a spurious past there's no way—"

"I'm not saying that. I'm not saying Yates or Meachum or anyone over there is dirty at all. You said that it was an inside job, not me. You said it back there, right in front of the guy no less. "

"Can we just get out of the car first?" Navarro said. "I need coffee more than oxygen at this point."

"Then you think it was just some random underworld party then," Chase persisted as they walked the few yards to the cop shop.

"Why not? Happens all the time. They steal these documents, sell 'em on the black market. They'd run a million bucks, maybe more for the right stuff."

"And you're saying the mob does this?"

Dougherty shrugged. "It's not beyond the realm of possibility. Dealing in shifty information is kinda their *metier*. Has been since back in the bootlegging days."

"Then why kill Yates?"

"Who knows? Maybe he caught them in the act, freaked out—"

"No—why kill him? Why not just incapacitate him?"

"Listen, agent, if Yates fought back it would have been all the thief could do to —"

"I don't buy that. I don't buy that at all. For one thing, Yates showed no defensive wounds. He had no skin under his nails, he suffered no other damage other than the wound that killed him, correct?"

"Well, uh," Dougherty said, "We'll have to wait for the coroner's report, but initial examination suggests yeah."

"And it was one wound, right into Yates' lung. It couldn't have been more controlled. "

"So, you're saying it was premeditated," Navarro said, not revealing whether he agreed.

"That's exactly what I'm saying. And furthermore, since Yates didn't fight back, it suggested he might have even known the killer."

"Or, he got the drop on him and—"

"No, I don't think so," Chase said. "You saw the blood spatter, the entry point. The insertion was from the front, not the back. To make your theory work, the killer would have had to sneak into the building at night, get past the security systems, make his way up to the sixty-first floor, sneak through the office to Yates' room, enter the room, walk, what was it? Ten feet? More? As far as Yates, and then stab him in one smooth, unobstructed movement through the lungs. Come on, Detective, I may be green, but that theory's bright red. As in no go."

"Yeah. Maybe. Can I have some freaking coffee first? Geez Louise."

"And the killer does this, why?" Chase went on, "to steal some crumby

documents? If he was this adept at B&E as we give him credit, he should have been able to slip in and out undetected. I mean he'd practically be a ninja."

"Right," Dougherty said with a sour tone. "You brush off my mob theory and come up with *ninjas*... Hell, maybe Batman came and stole the documents. Ever think of that Agent? Maybe it was Batman who killed Yates."

"Don't condescend to me. You have no proof that..."

And so on and so forth. Navarro wasn't saying anything as the two argued, just shut up for a while, concentrating on drowsily stepping through the cool hall of the precinct, through the crowds of cops bustling around holding papers, dragging perps. Vice had a woman in big heels and a frizzy blonde wig in a headlock. A strung out druggie was cuffed to a seat and whining like a dog. For a small neighborhood they sure had their fair share of scuz down there in the Ninth. They took the quickest route to Homicide and Navarro beelined for his Good Morning Joe, then they went straight to the security cam footage at Dougherty's desk—he embarrassedly flung the McDonalds wrappers burying his desk off into a nearby trash can.

"So, then what's the theory, Agent?" Navarro asked. "You don't seriously think Meachum did it? He has an alibi."

"I never said Meachum did it."

"You said he was a suspect."

"He is. Just not of murder."

Both detectives' eyebrows went up on their heads. "Not of murder—then of what?"

"Conspiracy."

Navarro's mouth gaped open, then shut again. Dougherty went silent as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Hold on—what? Conspiracy to do what?"

"I think maybe he took the documents after the fact. I think Yates wasn't just premeditated but was a planned kill. I think Meachum knew what was going to go down and I think he made an alibi at the exact right time. Or else if he didn't

know what was going to happen, after finding out what did happen to his partner he stole the documents to cover up what really happened. It would be the perfect opportunity to make a cool few million on the side too. He would have the perfect fall guy in the murderer. The police come in and wrap the whole thing up as one case, just because it's an easier explanation. And he gets off scott free."

"Chase, that's crazy. He was the one who told us about the stolen documents." Dougherty's face was turning pink.

"He told us because he had to. Somewhere down the line if the documents get leaked, if he didn't tell anyone then it's his ass."

"But what proof do you have of any of that?" Navarro asked.

"Nothing. It's just a feeling."

"Chrimler." Navarro seemed relieved. He sat back on the chair and sipped at his joe leisurely. "No jury's gonna convict on a suspicion, Special Agent. Least of all a complete confabulation like that stinker."

"Exactly. Which is why I came down here to watch those videos."

They'd scanned through four of five of the major cameras set on the key locations during the time of the murder. The place was bare, empty. It didn't show a thing for the forty-five minute interval. But the fifth camera did show something: It showed a scared, small man stumbling down the fire exit and tumbling out of the door on the first floor. And while the cameras didn't show the man committing the act in question, his guilt seemed palpable.

"Who is that?" Navarro barked, directing Dougherty to open the electronic records detailing access to the building. The times matched up with one name only—it was a lock.

"Manuel Espinoza," Dougherty said and in seconds they had the suspect's full address and history on screen.

"That's our guy," Navarro announced, a greedy smile stretching up his hard face. "Let's go nail this sonuvabitch."

Yet even as they hauled ass out of the precinct and made their way to Espinoza's apartment in the Lower East Side, something didn't sit well with Chase about it. Something didn't sit well at all.

Chapter 4

Light rain falling on the Lower East. Ludlow and Broome, a real sick joint. Graffiti caking the walls and the tight-shut crusty steel doors on places no one would rent even in hotly sought after Manhattan. Trash bags left on the street. Graffiti on the street too. On the stoops even. No square inch not covered by garbled letters, a vomit of names and slogans.

Navarro grabbed the perp's print out and glanced over the ID copy with a look of sheer disgust that could make even the subway rats squeak. It was the look of a tough pig ready to blow somebody away. Dougherty saw that look in his partner's eyes sometimes, it was a look that said *stand the hell back and don't get in the way of my collar*. He got a little worried, thinking this feebee lady might do just that. Get in the way that is. Thought if things got heated she might end up taking a slug. It was people like this Chase that took slugs in the heat of it, and times like this that they took 'em.

Heavy brows, a geekish face. Thick frame glasses. Espinoza was no heavy hitter. He'd go down like a light. Probably no need for guns even, saps would do—not that they were meant to be carried by New York's Finest anymore. More of a hold off banned from the 1990s, the blackjack. Old Mr. Rubber Pipe. Came in handy sometimes. Saved your life sometimes. Maybe it'd save his life this time.

"Leonard Manuel Espinosa," Navarro grunted, checking out the face printed on his rap sheet. "You got a stupid fuckin' name too, to go along with your stupid face."

He was right about the face part. Looked like a squirrel after someone stole his nuts.

"Traffic violations out the wazoo," Navarro went on. "This guy drives worse than my Aunt Sally out in Westchester. How come these bean-eaters never learn how to operate a vehicle properly?"

Dougherty asked, "think he's even home?"

"He's here alright, hiding like a rat in his nest."

"What's he hiding, you think?"

"His own ass!"

Chase just watched the pair silently from the back of the cruiser, watched them with her cool brown eyes. Mint chocolate chip. Nerves like frosted malt. She wasn't perfect though—Dougherty had watched her get all squirrely in the dank confines of the elevator down from the AxeS offices. Dougherty didn't blame her—the awkwardness and the stench of bodies. Gee-ross.

"Ready to roll?" Navarro said. Meat in his eyes, blood on his lips.

"Ready as a roller derby," Dougherty said. It was time to get their man.

They got out, one man a side, lady in back—Navarro with his Glock, lady agent with hers, Dougherty with the trusty blackjack. He slapped it a couple times in his hand, felt the dull lead weight inside. Comfortable weight. Never let him down once. They stormed up the stoop, and didn't announce themselves. No need. Navarro kicks the door—door comes clean open. Shoddy job. "Love your friends!" It says on the front of the door with a big heart scrawled in white urbanite graffiti. Irony at work—no one has friends in this town. Filing inside, another check of the deets to tell them there's two more floors to run up. Espinoza's rap sheet as long as your arm. It's more than just speeding tickets, Dougherty notices. Misdemeanor city. What's a scuz like that working a high gig with those gov contracts? But it's good that life's a mystery sometimes. Wouldn't be much fun otherwise.

They hit the third floor, empty and dead in the morning. Doors closed, rooms probably full of snoozing addicts with track mark constellations, body art worse than the front of the building. These are the sorts of thoughts rushing through a cop's head stepping up to the side of an apartment door about to bang on it with a closed fist. Afternoon wakeup call for some poor S.O.B.

"NYPD! Open up."

No sound from the inside. More deadness. Navarro's egg timer cracks. Navarro with the stepback and launch. Navarro's boot knocked the door clean open. Neat trick, Dougherty thought. Need to learn that one later.

"First room clear," Navarro calls and the denomination of 'room' is exaggerated—we're talking shoe box. Funsized. Inside, the bitter after-scent of too many bong

hits. How did this guy pass the drug test? Too many things unclear. And the lady behind him still silent as ever. Dougherty looked back to see her checking the corners, Glock pointed, eyes fixed. But not there really, not in the way she should be. Off somewhere else. Lala land. Dougherty let it go, finished checking the rest of the small space.

"Fucker's gone," Navarro barked. Navarro was right. Fucker was long gone.

Then the lady agent comes out with this stinker: "He's not gone. He's going down the fire escape." And how'd she know that, eh? No way to know, she was in the back. But life's full of weird crap like that and you just gotta take what you can get, where you can get it.

They hit the fire escape now, two cops and a feeb—sure as rain, sure as New York garbage, there's their man. He's there shivering with horror on the lower escape. Looks down, makes to jump. Chickens out. Makes to jump again, this time jumps. Navarro with the Glock out. Freeze! Perp doesn't freeze. Perp hits asphalt, flat on his *assphalt*. Navarro fires off a warning shot, perp gets the look of a roadlit deer and it's goodnight sweetheart.

...

"How are you involved with Clyde Yates?" Chase was asking him.

"Mr. Yates? I didn't even work for Mr. Yates. Not directly. He was in charge of clientele. I'm just a low level desk jockey. I don't know anything about it, honest!" Espinoza was already cringing. Stinky acting.

"That's not gonna fly, slimeball," Navarro spat. "You just made us bust our ass running up three flights of stairs and I haven't even had breakfast yet. Now you're playing innocent? Why'd you run, dirtbag? Huh? Why's an innocent guy gotta run?" He turned to Dougherty.

Dougherty said back, "No idea. If he's so innocent." The cop routine. It works sometimes. It worked that time. Espinoza spewed his guts like he'd taken a shot of ipecac with his coffee.

"I ran because—hell I don't even know. I was afraid."

"Afraid of what?" Navarro said.

"You wouldn't understand." The perp routine. It doesn't work sometimes. It

didn't work that time.

"Try me." Navarro insisted.

"No, I—"

"Unless you want to spend the rest of the day downtown. And let me tell you, the chairs in the Ninth ain't so comfortable, are they Detective?"

"Not so comfortable at all. You'll probably get piles."

"Ouch. Sounds painful. Right after that fall on your tushy?" Navarro grinned like a kid frying an ant with a magnifying glass. And Chase just watched the pair play out their shtick from the sidelines, cradling the Glock 19 in her hands uselessly. She was embarrassed watching them. Or maybe it was an itchy trigger finger. You could never tell with those feeb...

"Alright, alright," Espinoza the suspect said, folding like a cheap wallet. He breathed heavily. About to hyperventilate even. Thing about dopeheads is they got no lung capacity. And then you got hotshot companies trusting people like this to handle business? No wonder the country's gone to pot. No wonder the country's smoking it.

"It's just a misunderstanding, that's all. I didn't realize you were the police. Honest."

The two dicks glanced at one another, trying to decide whether to buy it. Wasn't a hard decision. No purchase necessary.

"You got someone else tailing you lately?" Dougherty said.

"Me? No, not specifically. It's—complicated."

"Uncomplicate it," Navarro said.

"Okay. Okay."

"Relax," Chase said, finally entering the conversation. "We know you didn't murder Yates."

"Y-you do?" Espinoza said, confused.

"You do?" Dougherty said, more confused.

"I mean, it's obvious," Chase explained. "The guy couldn't move a sofa to clean under it, do you see him stabbing someone through the rib cage?"

Dougherty exchanged another look with his partner. The look said whoopsie, hadn't thought of that one. She was right, the guy looked like he'd struggle to tear open a box of animal crackers.

"So, maybe he used another weapon of some kind. Maybe it wasn't a knife at all," Navarro said. He was reaching now. He was Jack Reacher. He was from Long Reach, Columbia. He was Halo Reach.

"Why were you in the building at the time Yates got whacked?" Dougherty said.

"Overtime, man. I got medical bills," the suspect said.

"Oh yeah?" Navarro said. "What you got, lying fuck's disease?"

"Please, Detective, I'm being honest with you. I have nothing to do with Mr. Yates' unfortunate death."

"Unfortunate murder," Chase corrected.

"Murder. Right."

"So, where are the docs, Espinoza?" Chase said. It threw Dougherty for a loop—it probably threw the perp through a sheet glass window. One look at him said it all: It was the blackjack look; stars in his eyes. *Hollywood*.

"You're thinking I took the documents?" Espinoza said weakly. Stupid move by the perp. Revealed too much. Sometimes there's weak perps, sometimes there's dumb ones. Espinoza was both.

"I'm thinking there was a whole lending library in your briefcase that night," Chase said. "Only thing I don't know is if you knew about the murder beforehand or just took the opportunity to score big."

"You're wrong!" Espinoza's face was milky with sweat. He shivered under the grip of her argument. He should have: It was a forceful argument.

"So, are you ready to tell us what you know?" Chase said.

"No, I mean yes, but I—I didn't take anything!" Espinoza wailed. "Honest I didn't! You have no proof I did anyway, just, just this dumb bitch's fairytale!"

Espinoza was looking to the two cops for relief this time. Another dumb move. Dumb, dumb, dumb...

"A fairytale, eh?" Navarro said. "Well in this fairytale you're about to turn into a pumpkin, buddy. Book 'em, Dougherty."

Dougherty slipped the blackjack back in its pouch out of consideration: This guy sure didn't need to lose any more brain cells.

"Wait!" he said as Dougherty slipped the cuffs on. "I'll talk. This is all—Yates was—the thing that happened was."

"Cheese and mice," Navarro said. "Try forming a full sentence."

"Okay. Yates was—he was being blackmailed."

Three law enforcers and a shifty suspect all trading glances now on the graffiti-ruined stoop of a shithole downtown. A real sight to see, if you were there to see it. Not that anyone was, on account of like, why would there be?

Chapter 5

A few hours in the ice box made Espinoza drop the whole sauce on the matter and this is what they found out. Turned out Meachum and Yates had been in hot water. Their big client was an important political figure and half their business the past two quarters was working with him to pave the way for some new bill or statute—what exactly, Espinoza didn't know. Above his pay grade. But what he did know was that recently something had come up to put that project in jeopardy.

What kind of something? A sex tape, of course.

"Did you watch the video personally?" Chase asked him.

"What?"

"She's asking you if you watched it, you damn dirty perv," Navarro said, his stale coffee breath pointed right in Espinoza's quivering face and seemingly getting off on how much the suspect disliked it. Well, the world is full of pots jeering at kettles.

"No—no of course not. I didn't see it." He went a deeper shade of red.

"Then how do you know what's on it?" Chase asked. "Do any of you buy this crap?" She said to the other two.

"No," Navarro said. "No, I don't buy it at all. Matter of fact I'm all out of change and I left my coupons at home." He got up and reached across the table, grabbing Espinoza by the collar. "You *did* watch the tape, you little peeping tom. And you're gonna tell us what was on it or else."

"I already *did* tell you, it's a compromising—"

"Tell us *exactly* what was on it, knucklehead," Chase said.

"I can't. I can't do that. Otherwise, what do I have left to negotiate with?"

"So, you're looking to get some kind of deal," Chase said. She turned to the others and scoffed, "He wants a deal." The two detectives laughed and laughed.

"You ain't getting immunity, kiddo," Dougherty said. "Not for Murder One."

"But I didn't murder anyone!"

"Then it's up to you to prove it, ain't it pal?" Navarro said. That was the killing blow. The three of them watched the last spirit float up out of Espinosa like a tired little ghost. He slumped to the table and gave in.

"What happened to innocent until proven guilty?" He said meekly, knowing it was pointless.

"You're not innocent, buster," Navarro said. "We have you dealing in unlawful surveillance of someone and then blackmail on top of that. And that's only the start of matters if we find your prints on the body..."

"But that wasn't—no, you can't spin this to make it look like I'm the bad guy! Besides, without the tape itself you have no proof it even exists."

"Uh, brainiac?" Dougherty said, tapping the round device in the middle of the table. "You just confessed it all to us. We don't need physical evidence now."

Espinoza's red face sagged. It looked like a melted frisbee. He dropped his head into his hands and began to shake.

"Hey, come on," Navarro said. "Don't start getting all weepy here. We still need answers."

"Fine, fine," he said, sniffing. "You win. You assholes—*sniff*—you treat the innocent like this while the real bad guys walk."

"They won't walk if you help us get them," Chase said, her voice softer now.

"It was a compromising video. Involving... *Sniff*... An important political figure connected to AxeS and a call girl."

At first they didn't buy it. Seemed too dirty. But as Espinoza went on, the situation became crystal. Someone took a video and that's when the blackmail started. Trouble in paradise. Later they confirmed Yates was taking out huge sums of cash. Company cash. Obviously it was pay off money. It ended up not enough and Yates made the most total payoff of all. He paid with his life.

So, maybe the blackmailer wanted the documents. Maybe Meachum was against that. Maybe the payoffs were buying time. Yates was the weak one. Yates was

cracking—hell, the blackmailer probably had dirt on him too... All such thoughts raced through Chase's mind as Espinoza spun his little yarn about accidentally entering the office and accidentally seeing the video on his laptop. And accidentally taking a still photo of the tape and storing it on his phone...

Navarro and Dougherty still didn't believe the story at first. The \$250,000 missing company funds changed their opinion. It had all been taken out over the past couple months by Yates personally. But eventually the blackmailer wanted those documents. Maybe Yates holds out and the blackmailer whacks him. Or maybe Yates folds to that demand too, does hand them over, then Meachum finds out and whacks Yates to get rid of the liability...

Both scenarios were possible. After all, they had no proof the documents went missing at the same time as the murder.

In fact. Espinoza probably wanted a piece of the action himself, otherwise why save that photo? It was too hot to hold onto for free. But he'd gotten the wrong kind of action, he'd gotten himself showing up on a security cam when a murder was going down. And he'd roadrunnered it straight out of there when he knew what was going down. But Espinoza, chicken that he was, didn't get a good look at the murderer. Meaning he couldn't finger the suspect. Another dead end.

"So, you think the blackmailer killed Yates?" Chase asked the weasel man. He was on his third acrid NYPD coffee but looked like he needed something way stiffer. His hair all bunched up, his face shiny with sweat. He'd been sitting at that table for hours.

"Listen, I really gotta hit the bathroom..."

"Answer the question and you can go," Navarro said.

"Who else? It had to be him."

"No," Chase said. "What benefit does that bring them? All this does is expose everything out in the open."

"I don't know. Maybe they got the money and just didn't care. Maybe they're just fucking psychos! Can I PLEASE go to the bathroom? I'm about to piss my pants here."

"Hold on," Chase said. "When did Yates hand over the last payment?"

"It was last Wednesday. I remember 'cause I overheard their argument the next day."

"Seems like you've been eavesdropping on them for a while," Navarro said.

"Look I—I didn't wanna be stuck in my dead end position my whole life. Please —" His whole body was shaking.

"That doesn't lineup," Chase said. "They killed Yates right after he gave them a bunch of money? It's an unnecessary risk with no benefit. No, I don't buy it."

"Okay, so maybe it wasn't the blackmailer then—look I don't know alright?"

"Then who would kill Yates? And why? He had no personal enemies that you know of?"

"None. Yates was a total shut-in. Ate TV dinners, went bowling alone. That kind of thing. He had no friends, no lovers, no enemies. The guy was a real—wet blanket."

"How do you know all this?" Navarro said.

"I—" Espinoza sighed. "Look, I followed him for a while. Wanted to maybe get some more dirt on him."

"And did you?" Chase asked.

"No, nothing. Like I said, the guy's plain vanilla. Boring as they come."

"Then his death has to be connected to this blackmail," Navarro said. "The timing of it is just too convenient."

"Or inconvenient," Chase said. "Depending on how you look at it." She turned to Espinoza. "What else did you do—did you follow him on the night he handed over the money?"

He shook his head. Of course not, that would have been too helpful.

"Fine. Whatever," Navarro said. "Tell us who is on this tape. Who the hell is this in the image?"

Espinoza kept his mouth tight shut, even as his whole body squirmed. He'd open his bladder before his mouth.

"Looks like you've got guts after all," Chase said. "But it doesn't matter, because it's obvious who this is."

"It is?" Navarro said, staring at her blankly.

"When you line it up with the fact he was an important client of AxeS, yes." Chase scrolled down her tablet which was open on a press release, announcing the partnership of the company with a certain political figure.

"Holy crap," Navarro said, his voice breaking. "That's Carter Creg. New York freaking senator."

"And it puts us one step closer," Chase said.

"How's that, Agent?"

"If we find the girl from that photo, then we'll find the blackmailer too."

Chase pointed to the girl on Espinoza's phone. "Where do we find the girl?"

"She's a—she's an escort, I think."

"Yeah, no shit," Navarro said. "Obviously she's a hooah. But where'd she come from?"

Espinoza gulped, shiftily looked between them. "I have no idea, really. She could be from anywhere. It's New York, there's almost as many hookers as garbage men."

Navarro traded a look with Chase. It was a look that said this case just got a whole lot more complicated and that from here on they'd have to watch where they tread, or else it was going to be their asses on the firing line.

Suddenly, Espinoza jerked, his whole body convulsing. A wave of relief seemed to pass over him. He didn't.... He did.

"Ah crap," he said, slumping down in a mélange of shame and total peace. And then Navarro looked under the table to find a hot yellow puddle crawling towards them and he and Chase both leapt out of their seats.

"It's not my fault," Espinoza whimpered. "I tried to tell you..."

"Jesus!" Navarro said. "You are one sick son of a bitch."

"Actually," Chase said, looking at Espinoza's phone again. "That's how we'll get the name of the girl."

"Huh?" Navarro said.

"All we have to do is make the senator piss his pants."

Chapter 6

Senator Carter Creg was a hard man to get to, but not impossible. And suggesting she knew about the sex tape put Chase in sudden proximity with him. With his lustrous golden hair and gleaming white teeth, his large gesticulating hands every time he spoke on television. He was cool and composed to an abnormal degree and likely had chemical help for it, judging by the glassy look in his glacial blue eyes, the stuff of breath mint commercials. His tailored pinstripe suit was flattering and hung well on his stout body, but failed to completely hide his weak chin or the loose flap of skin that hung under it, which gave the air of a plucked chicken.

They were sitting at a secluded table in the Hilton, a self-indulgent spread sat before them on the table—fresh fruits, pancakes with blueberry sauce, caviar and crackers, Greek salad and brie bites, and spinach dip and quiche. Brunch for Schmucks.

The senator coolly sipped dark rich espresso from a tiny white mug. His head was constantly turning to his aides, giving them messages, or dropping to his phone to return an email. Here was someone who probably acted far more important than he probably was—to get through the barrier of noise to him, Chase found herself repeating herself two or three times each question. She couldn't just demand he put the phone away and stop acting like a douche yuppie—he wasn't an official suspect in the case yet; all she had so far was hearsay, which isn't nearly enough when you want to finger a government high-up for murder. The purpose of the visit was to better solidify Creg's role in everything.

"And then I just chose my career and put all my effort into that," the senator was saying, giving her meaningless backstory she didn't ask to hear—a spiel that had likely been tailored more times than the suit.

"So, you're a workaholic," Chase replied.

"Oh, I sometimes have time for things outside of work," Creg said, his douche smile beaming. He even tried leaning over and placing a big hand over hers, from which Chase quickly extricated herself. This guy just couldn't help himself. She couldn't figure if this was his deviancy at work or some kind of professional

habit, a means he had of drawing people in. Either way it made her skin crawl to feel that clammy cold slab of skin over her hand. She didn't smile back, just glanced down at her notes. In turn, Creg's own smile faltered and he drew back, a dull look in his eye, giving Chase the idea he was insulted, that things didn't usually go that way for him. Chase flashed on to the fact that it almost certainly was him in the sex tape. Okay, fine. So, he screwed a hooker. But would he kill for it? That was the question.

Creg was still running through a boilerplate chapter of his narrative when Chase cut in, stopping him mid sentence. "Was there a compromising tape made of you, Senator?"

He stopped dead still, his face freezing up. A fly could have landed on his nose and he wouldn't have blinked. For a moment, the finely crafted mask cracked.

Chase went on, "Anything you say will be kept strictly confidential. But I do remind you that lying to a law enforcer isn't in your best interest." She kept the pressure on. She had him in a corner now. How are you going to respond, Creg? How do you respond when cornered?

He dropped his Blackberry phone on the table, folded his giant digits together into a wall of flesh. The diplomatic stance. The defensive stance. Looking at her cool and sternly, Creg said, "What would that have to do with this?"

"It has a lot to do with it," Chase said, internally jolted by a small thrill. He hadn't directly refuted the claim. "If blackmail is involved, and government documents are changing hands as a result of said blackmail, then we have motive."

"Motive? For leaking documents?"

"For murder."

His face went a shade paler then, the pink also draining from his knuckles. She felt him trembling slightly. The sensation of the chill that was going up his spine bled into hers and it gave her gooseflesh. The hook had landed; now she just had to reel him in.

"I think I'm going to need to confer with my attorney before answering any more of your questions, Special Agent Chase." The vein in his left temple had started throbbing. It looked like a worm crawling under his skin.

"That's understandable. But you should know, Senator, that pointing me in the direction of someone who would take such tapes—you don't have to admit any connection to yourself—if you pointed me in the right direction, maybe it would expedite their arrest. Maybe you wouldn't have to testify at all. Maybe this whole thing could go away before anyone caught wind of a scandal..."

He seemed to consider it. It was a hard sell, almost a Hail Mary. Of course if the scuz behind the tape was arrested it only increased the chances of the senator's extracurricular activities coming to light. But would he make that connection? Would he do it in this Hilton, with a million things on his mind and with the pressure on him? Chase had control of the narrative now, had him panicking. She was hoping that would be enough to short circuit his thoughts and make him act brashly.

It worked.

Scribbling on a memo with his Montblanc pen, he tore the note off, folded it, and silently slid it across the table, his ice eyes tinged with anger and the embarrassment of defeat.

"Now I hope this is the end of your requests from me, Agent," he said darkly. "I don't like to be kept on anyone's leash."

"Of course you don't," Chase replied. "But then again, who does?"

Chapter 7

The Brooklyn Heights neighborhood where Jet Mole had his brothel wasn't the total dump Chase was expecting. The streets were all swept clean and the brownstone apartment buildings here all seemed in good upkeep. Cars on the road were mid-to-high tier—some crusty Toyota vans and GMC sedans but a few Lexuses and even a cherry red Tesla sat just down the road. Didn't seem like the kind of place you'd find a secret sex club, but then this was no ordinary sex club. It catered to senators.

And Chase knew from experience that it was these places that sat on the edge of the banal and the seedy that you had to watch out for. This was where Manhattan's high life crossed over with the underworld. It acted as a kind of interstitial zone between the surface reality of what everyone assumed the world was about—getting up, going to work, making money, eating dinner—and the filthy scum stuck to the underbelly of that world, where everyone was out to get theirs, where there was no service you couldn't buy for the right price, and it didn't matter who got hurt in the process.

The lines got blurry in a place like this. People forgot their true loyalties, their roles. That made them unpredictable. It made them dangerous.

The balustrade rattled as Chase climbed the stoop to a rickety wooden door fronted by a half-assed excuse for a portico, its white coat of paint cracking and peeling off. It was the crumbiest building on the whole block and she'd immediately been drawn to it. She took a deep breath at the door and let the scent of post-rain Brooklyn fill her lungs, then gave one more quick look at her surroundings: The area was clear. She heard the distant hoots and hollers of drunken teens, the clip clop of heels on concrete, the rattle and groan of cars making their way home from a backbreaking job. She was standing in the middle of a hundred thousand lives, all swirling on and on and around. It made her dizzy.

She placed her ear to the door and listened for any signs of life. Checked her watch. Eight-thirty. Crouching there by the door with her face against it and listening, it almost felt like she was at confessional. She heard a grunt of some

kind, then a scratching sound as shoes walked across a hardwood floor. The sound was coming closer. Someone must have seen her from the window. Chase pulled the Glock 19 from her holster and took a step back, waiting for the footsteps to reach the door. The handle turned. She raised the pistol and pointed it in the face of the guy behind it...

There in the sights of her gun stood a lean black man with his hair trimmed to the scalp, a brush of stubble over his hard jaw. He wore a leather sleeveless jacket, tattoos down both arms, tight leopard print pants tucked into knee-high boots and his face had been generously pierced. Narrow black eyes peered out from under hard angled brows wrinkled in surprise, consternation, threat. He'd just let a girl get the drop on him. That didn't sit right.

"FBI," Chase said. "No sudden movements."

"Oh geez, FBI," the man said lazily. "Is that all? Honey, I thought you were Death sent to take my soul."

"Just here on an investigation."

"Then would you mind getting that piece out of my face?" The man said in a smooth, almost feminine voice. "It's causing me indigestion."

Chase quickly searched him for a weapon but found none. She lowered her weapon. An awkward silence stretched between them.

"I was just coming out for a smoke you know," he said. "Is that against the law too now?"

"Don't take it personally. I couldn't take any chances." She got out her badge and showed it to him. The man briefly glanced at it.

"Uh huh. Heather Chase. Catchy." He lit up his cigarette using a gold lighter and sat down on the stoop. Chase kept the gun in her right hand but lowered it to her side. "Hey, you got any Alka-Seltzer on you?" He asked.

"Afraid not. Would you be so kind as to identify yourself?"

"Me? I'm no one you know." He peered up at her and exhaled a mouthful of smoke, then shrugged, peering at her again. "Heh, most of the scuzfucks who point a piece at me look a lot worse than you."

"I'll take that as a compliment. Do you live here? Or are you—"

"A john? No lady. I just run the day-to-day. Or night-to-night, I guess you could say."

"You're Jet Mole then."

A slight grin rose on the right side of his face. "Don't hold it against me, honey."

"You seem very nonchalant about the fact you're working at a brothel," Chase added.

Mole shrugged again, blowing another cool gray cloud into the ether. "Hell, prostitution ain't the taboo it used to be. No sweat off my nose. As long as we keep things kosher, not even the PD really cares what we do."

"Not even in Brooklyn Heights?"

"Especially not in Brooklyn Heights. These good white folk don't want to haul their rich asses all the way downtown just to get their freak on, know what I mean?"

"Story goes, you haven't been keeping things kosher though. Story goes you've been making sex tapes of people. The wrong kinds of people. The kinds of people who could make your... Business... A lot harder. Doesn't seem like a very smart thing to do."

He shot her a glance, but it didn't reveal anything specific. Mole also didn't go out of his way to deny the charge. Chase took it for a practiced poker face. The less you gave away, the less you were culpable for. It was basic street logic.

"Like I said," Mole finally said. "I jus' run the day-to-day. If some perv has gone all candid camera on someone's ass then it ain't my problem. But one thing I do know is there's no easy way to spy in here. Think we were born yesterday? Creeps always be trying to pull that shit."

"Can you be more specific? How do you prevent it?"

"Let me show you honey. If you got the brass to walk in here, that is."

"Just no sudden movements." Chase walked up the stoop behind Mole and into the lobby. Jet Mole put out his cigarette in a little portable ashtray on the end of his lighter then dashed up the staircase, his leather waistcoat squeaking as he

walked. Leading her to the second floor they traversed a red carpeted hallway where he pulled a plastic card from his pocket and swiped it on the door. They went inside the room: It was what she'd been expecting, but it still hit her like a two-by-four. The room was lit by a red lamp that threw the bed and curtains into a sultry crimson, and the bed was covered in various pillows. The bed itself was a queen size with high thread count linen and it had been made recently. A vague strawberry scent clung to the air. Chase felt herself blushing as she caught the sounds coming through the walls. Chase took a few steps over to the curtains and drew them open—only to find a solid wall behind them.

"See?" Mole said, grinning. "You might be able to hear other folk but you sure as hell can't see 'em. We're all about *discreteness*, honey. If anyone wanted to watch it'd have to be from a peephole." He went around the walls checking, lifting picture frames, even so far as going into the bathroom and pulling at the mirror above the sink. "As you can see, there's no place such a peep hole could be. No fake panels to hide the peeper, no secret microphones to record pillow talk. No additives or preservatives. We're spy free, for only the cleanest debauchery."

"You meant to say you really don't know about a sex tape?"

"Why would I?"

"In other cases I know of, the proprietors of such a business as yours sometimes make double their earnings: On one side you have the johns paying for service, on the other you have perves behind the wall getting a free show. And in some cases they made triple on the high profile johns by taking video and blackmailing them after the fact. The victims couldn't do anything about it without exposing themselves, so the scam went on unabated for years."

"A nice theory—just one problem with that, FBI agent."

"Which is?"

"Which is that no big hot shot is gonna be caught dead coming down to a boudoir in the Heights. Fucker and fuckee will generally retire to a more discreet location in that case. They have the girls delivered."

Chase stopped dead in her tracks. He was right, of course. In this day and age of constant surveillance, no public figure would be stupid enough to take such a risk—let alone a senator.

"Then you run an escort service door-to-door," Chase said.

Mole made a gun shape out of his hand and pretended to pull the trigger. "As the dog's name goes—Bingo."

"Then you're gonna have to let me see your client list. I need dates, times, and most of all, places."

"Ah, come on now baby, don't break my balls over this. You should know better. You think we keep records of our clients? This is a hush-hush operation I'm trying to run."

"Then you better start gathering your legal fees, Mole, because you're about to find yourself in a long, painful process of litigation."

"Ah nuts, hardball already?" A grin stretched across his face as he started walking down the landing again to the last door. "And here I thought we could extend the mental foreplay. Goin' all Clarice and Dr. Lecter on that shit."

"I don't have the time to indulge in your perverted fantasies," Chase said dryly. "I'm a United States federal agent, not one of your ruts for hire."

"Ruts for hire, ha ha. I like it, I like it." Mole unlocked the door at the far end of the hall and led her inside, turning on the light. A bear skin rug on the floor, a leopard print sofa in the corner. A big deer's head hung on the wall, its antlers extending into the room. It looked like someone had killed a zoo in here. While the client rooms had been upscale, Mole's own office went for a more exotic look. Framed black and white stills of beautiful young women adorned the far wall, and some of men too. The room was cloying with an artificial scent of something that was almost as bad as Hogan's cologne.

Mole took out a set of clunky keys from his pocket and unlocked an antique armoire in the corner. From that he pulled out a fireproof box and put in a combination to open it.

"You know how to keep things secure," Chase remarked.

"Of course," Mole said. "Knowledge is power after all." He grinned again, his tobacco-yellow shark teeth glistening dully under the ceiling light. Flipping through the contents of the fireproof box he finally pulled out a leather bound booklet with a series of colored dividers.

"Lessee here... Who were you looking for again?"

"Carter Creg."

"Oh," Mole said innocently. "Creg, Creg... Now was that with a C or a K?"

"With a C. C-r-e-g."

Mole's eyes went a size bigger. "As in *New York Senator Creg*?"

"Cut the act, I know he was getting girls from you."

He said nothing, silently flipped through the dividers with a grin pasted to his face.

Chase was thrown a little now. He didn't seem to take this seriously at all. Maybe the senator wasn't even that big a deal. They probably had all sorts of high society types calling up. Payoffs to the police weren't so out there either. While the NYPD were lax, she couldn't imagine Vice just letting this slide under their noses. Not without ample compensation for their selective blindness. But that wasn't her major concern right now—let Internal Affairs handle it.

"Ah, here we go. *Creggos*, I put him under." Mole looked up at her smiling, "a little codename system I use."

"Uh huh. Airtight."

"So, uh—well I'll be. He has been a little—shall we say—active, this past year. Guy's got an appetite for the hotties."

"So I've heard. Can I get a copy of that?"

Jet Mole held the book flat against his chest defensively and put on a staged frown. "Aw, but agent, this here is highly sensitive material."

"I'm not kidding around here Mole, either hand it over or—"

"Alright, alright, alright—geez. Some girls just don't wanna have fun, eh?"

Chase ignored the inanity and urged him to pass her the book. He did so and she took a photo of the list. Mole wasn't kidding—Senator Creg had had liaisons with six different girls just within that past month.

"What the hell is he on?" Chase muttered.

"Someone's got a hankering for them blue pills, huh?" Mole said, his shark teeth glistening like a row of sharp gold bullets.

She left the joint behind and started her Taurus and prepared to head back to Manhattan where she'd start checking some of these girls off the list. As she turned out of the block on Pierrepoint and Hicks she thought she caught the flash of headlights in her rear view. She gazed at the mirror for a while, but nothing stood out.

She hoped it was just her imagination.

Chapter 8

Coming off the Brooklyn Bridge, Chase was certain it wasn't just her imagination. Those headlights in the rear were on her again. Launching herself down the cold gray street it didn't feel like she was fleeing. She wasn't the fly here, she was the spider. And without much leads to go on, it was to her benefit to let things happen.

Let them come, she thought, barreling down through the Lower East Side, a sea of lights opening up the purple darkness, trailing tails of steam. It was a match, a contest. You lived your life in a game like this—you were always the hunter or the prey. It was the way the city worked. It was the way the Bureau worked. Just because it was professional, because it was government sponsored, didn't make the core fact of the matter change. It didn't alter the fact they were locked in combat, always, with another entity out there. Cuffs and guns, wiretaps and street networks—the medium changed but the game didn't. Hunter and prey.

The street opened up to her like a blur—pedestrians, buildings, traffic lights, and signs all ran into one another. Taxis, trucks, sedans, motorbikes, all just background noise, all just a backdrop to the real arena, where people hunted each other in the New York night.

And someone was out there hunting for her. She got into the mindset now. Let them come. It just pushed her closer to the truth.

Senator Creg had made himself prey, made it easy for the blackmailer with his two-girl-a-week habit. He had power and influence and money—that made him a ripe, juicy target too.

But where did it all fit in?

How did blackmailing a New York senator lead to Yates' death? There had to be a connection, Chase could feel it deep in her marrow. She felt it just as real as the hunks of steel hurtling by her at sixty miles an hour as she got onto Bowery. Running through the Ninth again, picking up the scent. She felt it just as clear and crisp as the January breeze rushing past her windscreen. The connection had to be through this blackmailer. Someone didn't want her to find that connection.

That same someone was likely linked to the lights that never seemed to leave her rear view—the familiar grill of the Dodge Challenger sometimes glistening white under the halogen of the street lights lining the road.

The blackmailer had been tailing Creg for weeks. They'd waited until they could get incontrovertible dirt on him. Then they'd drained AxeS dry. But why was AxeS paying for Creg's mistakes? That's the part that stuck in Chase's craw, the irritant she couldn't shake. Sure they were making some kind of deal with the senator, were probably set to make bank. And the connection to the political world was invaluable. But was that all it was? She couldn't shake the feeling there was something more to it than that. Something dirtier they didn't want coming out—and it had something to do with those missing documents.

Her mind was becoming clearer by the minute—opening up like the sky after a rainstorm. She got onto Third Ave and punched it, rocketed North, and watched the headlights behind her grow smaller. Through Gramercy Park now and all the way up to Kips Bay, the oily East River peeping out at her every so often through the gaps in the high rise buildings like a black strobe light.

AxeS. The senator. And the stolen documents. Chase would use the call girls as her inflection point too—a lever to wedge herself into this complicated matter. One of the addresses in Mole's book would be the place the blackmailer made their little movie. She marked two locations off on the way North, one in Midtown, one on Ninety-Sixth and Amsterdam. Her FBI badge came in handy. The landlords weren't impressed but did let her scope the apartments. Short term leases, fuckpads. So far no dice. Senator Creg moved around. He had a lot of cash to burn. Made anonymity easier; for a while.

But it all caught up to him in the end.

She took the Willis Avenue Bridge into the Bronx. One more location around here, a small joint on Willis and a Hundred-Thirty-Eighth, a low rise red brick joint opposite a 99c Zone with the first floor given over on one side to a deli, a barber shop, and a liquor store. This place was lower class than the others. Maybe he was running out of cash. Maybe he liked the thrill of it—a real dump even for the area—the outer walls coated in a total mural of graffiti ranging from heavy bubble font gang tags and abstract curves and spirals to purple tentacles of alien octopi. Chase pulled over and clocked her rear—no sign of the Challenger. She chanced getting out and walking the corner and down the street until she

found the entrance to the apartment—a simple red door set into a recess in the brick with a square glass window. The lock was set in brass, a simple job that seemed like it would be a cinch to pick. No one living in this neck of the woods likely had much to steal.

It would also have made it easier for the blackmailers to get what they needed.

She tried the handle which didn't budge, then took a few steps back and surveyed the entrance again. No intercom even. Knocking on the door would do no good. Either you had a key or you called someone inside to come open the door. A brief fog came up over Chase then, chilling her spine and making her clock the street again—but still no sign of the Challenger. She could probably ace the lock no problem, but suddenly she wanted to be off the street. But the only other way up was the fire escape and the ladder had been raised a good ten feet up, probably to avoid opportunist cat burglars. Wait—there was another way. The liquor store was part of the same building. There was surely a way up from it. She scooted back around and made to enter the store.

Just as she was about to enter, two Hispanic girls came out—both in tight blue jeans and big floppy sweaters, both with elbow-length hair parted down the middle, black with blonde highlights—the one on the left in the beige sweater looked to be in her early twenties thanks to the makeup caking her face, but the one in the teal sweater couldn't have been more than eighteen or nineteen no matter how hard she tried to hide it.

Chase passed them by and entered the little bodega style liquor store. The man behind the counter looked Middle Eastern with his bald, cinnamon pate and large black tear-shaped eyes over a bulbous nose and conspicuous mustache. He was far from svelte and his gut stretched out the bottom of his green horizontal striped shirt.

"Yees," he said, stretching his vowels, "how can I help you?"

"I need to see the rooms upstairs."

"Can't help you there. I am not the landlord."

"Oh yeah? But you live here, right?"

"Yes, so?"

"So, you can let me up to the upper floors."

"No, no, that I cannot."

"Then how about instead I bust you for selling alcohol to minors?"

"What? What you talking about? I sell no alcohol to a minor."

"The two girls that walked out of here with four bottles of gin paints a different picture, buster."

"No, no, they have IDs. I check. I check."

"Both of them?"

"Both of them, yes, I check."

"Those IDs have got to be faker than a five-dollar pair of Levis. Do you even have a valid liquor license?"

"What you talking about? Of course I do!"

"Well, don't count on having it for long."

"Ah, what is this! Fine, fine, I let you up. What FBI doing poking their nose in people's business anyway? Government overreaching as always!"

"Save the complaints for your district representative and just let me in the back, Papi."

"Fine, fine. Just don't call me Papi. I'm not a Spanish, okay? Everyone always mix me up with them, every day they think I from Mexico!"

"Cry me a river."

Flickering light made the route upstairs seedier than it needed to be. The carpet was moldy and the whole hallway choked her with its dank aroma. She was on her own now, the liquor shopkeeper heading back so no one lifted his stock in his absence. Chase made her way up to the third floor and found the address listed in Mole's book. It didn't take much effort to tease the lock open.

The room was a real slob job. The kind of place flies come on vacation during the winter. The bed lay unmade and the little kitchenette gave off the foul smell of expired luncheon meat. Chase entered the bedroom and visualized the scene

the way it had been presented in the still on Espinoza's phone. This was the place alright. She took a few steps backwards until she found herself in the corner. The shot was taken more or less from where she was standing. She turned and ran her fingers over the wallpaper until she found a small bump. Here. This was it. She picked at the bump with her fingernail and a small, hard object came into view. Bingo. This was the camera—a wireless, miniature spy job. The blackmailer had planted it here and could have caught the whole thing from basically anywhere in the vicinity. Technology made the peeping tom's life too easy. A wave of disappointment crested over her then—she was expecting to get something, a lead, a trace, anything. All she got was a \$20 camera from AliExpress.

But the disappointment was interrupted suddenly by a flash in the window, and instinctively she hit the floor as a rain of bullets broke the glass clean open—followed by the sound of something crashing inside. Chase opened her eyes when she felt the heat. Fire was spreading across the carpet. She'd just been bought the wrong kind of drink: A Molotov cocktail.

Chapter 9

The bottle exploded and the room filled with the dizzying smell of gasoline. Chase scrambled up and felt the broken window glass slicing into her hand. She rushed to grab a blanket and quell the spreading flame but it was too late—the fire had caught on the cheap material of the drapes and now half the wall surged with bright orange fire, smoke billowing off it in thick black clouds that smothered the room. She called in back up on her radio, but knew she was on her own. No one was faster than fire.

Exiting the room, Chase began slamming on doors and calling out "FIRE!" Confused and irritated neighbors spilled out into the hallway and, seeing the blaze growling out from under the door, started to panic. They split down the stairs in a stampede, screaming now as they filed out the East side door onto the street.

But Chase didn't exit that way. Chase came South and popped out into the liquor store.

The shopkeeper there was furious, cowering behind the register.

"I knew I shouldn't let you in! I knew you just trouble!" He wailed.

"Shut your trap and get down, unless you want your mustache shot off."

"Ahh, nothing but trouble you government!"

Grabbing a green bottle of Tanqueray Dry, Chase whipped the cap off and then tore her shirt sleeve and inserted it into the gin.

"What the hell you doing?" The shopkeeper said.

"Fighting fire with fire." Grabbing a book of matches from the counter she lit the rag, then threw the makeshift Molotov out at the three men who were sniping the joint. The bottle exploded in a brilliant conflagration that lit up the darkening street. Screams rang out from both directions. She couldn't catch a good look at the men but saw the figures dash away from the blast. Raising her Glock 19 she put one of the gunmen behind her sights just like she'd been taught, then took a breath and squeezed the trigger. The shot rang out and the suspect folded over.

Five of them in total—that left four. But now they knew her position.

She ducked back inside the liquor store.

"You crazy, lady! You crazy!" The shopkeeper was still going on. "You trying to get us killed!"

"Quit your bitching," Chase said, rolling the possibilities in her mind. The street was too wide and open, that was the problem. And her car was parked too far down the road to chance making a run for it. That meant she'd have to face off against the goons or wait for back up to arrive—if it ever would. The fire would draw the cops at least. She gave it maybe five, ten minutes. Could she survive that long?

As if to answer her query, the front glass of the store exploded into a sparkling waterfall, making the shopkeeper scream. The black SUV they were in burned rubber over the asphalt as it came squealing back to the front, their guns blazing. Sounded like ARs.

What the hell was going on? What were these maniacs trying to do, start a war?

"Federal agent!" She tried yelling. "Cease fire!"

But all that came back was another volley of hot lead, smashing a shelf full of spirits and soaking the floor in alcohol. The room was starting to heat up as the flames from upstairs quickly spread through the unprotected building.

This wasn't good. Time was running out and this whole store could blow like a powder keg. Automatic fire rained horizontally and the inside of the establishment fell apart—the long fluorescent light crashing down from the ceiling, the other front window smashing clean open. The shopkeeper had stopped whining now—he had gone completely prone on the floor and had his eyes clenched shut, his hands over his head as liquor bottles popped at random around him.

Staying here meant death. She needed to run. Tearing more of her shirt, she fixed up another Molotov, but just as she lit it, the automatics honed in on her position and laid a concentrated volley on the shelf she covered behind—she almost dropped the bottle! Stamping out the rag, Chase rethought her strategy. This lame explosive wouldn't cut it and her Glock wouldn't put a dent in them, not when they were carrying assault rifles. She needed to head North and bolt to her

car. She needed a distraction, fast.

She got one.

Screeching tires from outside coincided with a series of subdued gunshots—likely a suppressed submachine gun—followed by the deep cries of several men. Chase chanced peeping up from the wreckage to see one of the gunmen hanging limp out of the SUV window, with two others furiously shooting back at something up the road. Had the cops arrived already? But that wouldn't explain what she heard—the cops don't use *suppressed subs*, and they certainly don't open fire without announcing their presence. There was no siren, no bullhorn, no command to stand down. Just one—and now two of the gunmen are dead. With the one she'd killed that was three down, two to go.

Now or never. Chase sprung to her feet like a jungle cat and, keeping crouched down, threaded her way through the wrecked shelves until she was at the entrance. She stuck her head out once to get a look as squealing tires came down the street—and in that split second she saw the headlights.

The same headlights that had been following her all the way here. The full car passed under a streetlight and came into view now: A dark blue Dodge Challenger. Well, at least her stalker had taste...

She wasn't about to let this opportunity go to waste. The next time the gunmen opened fire on the Challenger, Chase tore out the door and bolted down the road. Her car was parked on the corner, maybe three-hundred yards away, maybe less. But in this situation it may as well have been ten miles. Gunfire echoed through her brain as she ran and ran, not looking back, not stopping for a second. The night flew past her in a dizzying haze of streetlights and reflections in shimmering shop glass, cars passing and stopping and reversing upon seeing the scene at the liquor store—all of it spun past her as her heels beat pavement and dragged her further on, just a little closer, just until she could reach the end of the street.

And then huffing deep, cloudy breaths Chase threw herself around the edge of the block and safe behind the corner. She'd made it. She wasn't dead yet.

But this wasn't over yet. Taking a few deep lungfuls of the bitter Bronx air, Chase stood up and dashed to her car, started the engine while keeping her eyes fixed in the rear view. She was just pulling out of the road when those headlights

came again. Her heart jerked out of her chest and she fumbled with the Glock, racking its slide and rolling down her window, speeding up down the road to try and get away. She wasn't going to go out without a fight. But the Challenger got bigger as its powerful V8 rocketed it closer and closer. Her crappy old Taurus didn't stand a chance. Pretty soon the car had come all the way up on her side—Chase tried evasive maneuvers, cut a hard right and barreled South again, but the Challenger wouldn't leave her sight. The Challenger turned better than her. The Challenger took straights better. Whoever this was, they were no amateur drivers.

He was close enough to shoot her now, the man in the dark car. So why didn't he? When the car drew up beside her in the next lane, she got her answer: It came in the form of a badge held up by the man through his window as he gestured for her to pull over. It wasn't a cop badge and it wasn't an FBI badge either. It was a badge she hadn't seen before.

It said Peyton Maddox, Secret Service.

"Secret Service? Really?" Chase was dumbfounded. She stopped the car and waited for Maddox to pull up next to her. She was still gripping the Glock, not knowing what to do. From the distance, the siren of several fire trucks and squad cars rang out in the hollow Bronx night. About freaking time. She rolled down her window. "What the hell is the Secret Service doing tailing a federal agent around town?"

"I want what you want," Maddox said. "The tape."

"The tape? So that's what this is about. You're Creg's lapdog."

The tough looking man with the crew cut and the narrow eyes didn't wince at her accusation, didn't really react at all. "Where I get my orders is not important."

"You work for the senator, let's stop bullshitting each other."

"It's true that I work for the senator, in a way..."

He just admitted it, just like that. What happened to the secret part of Secret Service?

"Yeah, well, you could have just approached me earlier, instead of scaring the crap out of me."

"You don't seem that scared at all, Agent."

"Let's just cut the crapola. Frankly, I don't care about the sex tape and I don't care about Senator Creg's precious little reputation. I just want to catch the guy who killed Yates."

"And do you have any leads for that?"

"Maybe I do. But the corner of a warzone isn't the place to trade tips, buzzcut."

"So, where do you want to go?"

"Home. Alone. Without a big blue douchecar in my rear view the whole way."

"Agent, don't you think you should throw me a bone here? Given that I just saved your life and all."

"You really don't hesitate at calling in favors, do you Agent Maddox?"

He just shrugged. Seemed like a humorless guy. Didn't matter—Chase wasn't here to socialize. She'd settled down a little now, the adrenaline from the firefight finally starting to leave her system. She thought clearly about the man in front of her. A quick call to the Bureau would confirm he was who he said he was. But could she really trust someone working with Creg? He was just as tainted as the others. At the same time, she wasn't spoiled for help. The NYPD were so far behind now it would just be a waste of time to depend on them.

"Well?" Maddox said.

"Look, I did get a clue and I don't know whether it's going to get hairy again, so you may as well tag along."

"What's the clue?"

"Let's get out of here and I'll tell you."

He tailed her, as always, down into Harlem, with Chase purposefully not slowing down until she got word back from the Bureau. A simple message from Hogan confirmed: "Yes, Chase, he's legit." She finally pulled over outside a Popeye's, but Chase didn't get out of the car. Again, Maddox pulled next to her.

"Alright, listen Crewcut, the clue is twofold: The first is that the apartment I was just in was where the sex tape was shot. The fact I was assaulted on the way out

is maybe confirmation I'm on the right track there."

"Agreed. What's the second part?"

"The second part is Creg only ever went to that apartment with one girl in particular: Jenny Annapolis. It should be simple enough to track her down. But if whoever those gunmen are know about the apartment then chances are they know about the girl too. And what I can't figure out is why the gunmen tried to kill you, if their objective is to bury this thing."

"I hardly think the senator hired that gang, if that's what you're implying."

"I don't know what I'm implying."

"Either way, until we figure this thing out it sounds like you'll need back up, Chase."

"Yeah. A whole damn army."

...

Annapolis lived in a secluded spot dead South of Manhattan within spitting distance of the Brooklyn Bridge. The dark area wasn't helped out by the growing cover of night and the heavy rain clouds that had begun their crawl over the city. Chase parked her Taurus on the corner and they made their way around to the secluded apartment building.

"Funny how things work out," she muttered to Maddox as they entered the tattered front of the red brick building, a six-story joint of the usual fare. "Went from all the way North to all the way South. Seems super out of her way that they used that pad in the Bronx."

"Yeah, well, the senator does like his privacy." There was a touch of cynicism in his voice. He didn't seem to particularly approve of his boss's actions, though as a flattrap from the service he would probably do whatever was ordered of him, regardless how dirty.

The apartment complex carved itself out of the asphalt-colored sky like a silhouette made of ash, standing in a dirt lot among other such buildings, each one unique in its own disheveled way, a leftover housing project from the 1970s fallen into disrepair. They made their way up to the third floor and the closer they got the deeper the dread grew inside Chase. Something was wrong, she

could feel it. They weren't going to find anything pretty behind the door of 314.

She was right.

They found Jenny Annapolis there on the floor, red marks pressed into her blue neck. She wasn't breathing. She hadn't been for a while.

Chapter 10

Only two squad cars showed up to the lot which demonstrated the low importance given to the incident—not enough zeros on the end of the girl's paychecks to warrant much attention. There was one car from the Fifth and one from the Ninth—it was Detective Dougherty who was first to come in. He met her outside and they went back up into the complex, the inside dingy and dim with its low floor lighting and thin scraggly carpets. But at least it was warm in here, the joint efficiently steam heated without much loss.

"So, this is one of your girls?" Was the way Dougherty said it, side-glancing Chase as they went up the stairs. She wasn't in the mood for taking the elevator. "One of them from your list I mean," Dougherty added. "You think it's connected to Yates and all that?"

Chase nodded faintly, her mind floating into that grape-tinted blush it always did at a murder scene, death's auras bleeding into her own. "Not just one of. I'm thinking it's *the* girl. The one on the tape, Detective." They stepped inside—their strange combination highlighted in the mirror just by Annapolis's door. Chase's 5'9", her shoulder-length dark auburn hair and muted brown eyes, her dark blue pant suit; this was all set in contrast to Dougherty's 6'1", his faded features in a padded face, standing there in his big woolen overcoat over a scraggly white shirt and mustard colored tie. She concentrated hard on the ugly tie—it made her forget the ill feeling the room gave her for a moment. It didn't make her heart pound any less though, didn't make the twisting panic inside her stop wrenching her inside out. She willed herself not to panic, to fall into a dull, practiced haze, to repeat to herself her mission, purpose. Her point being here: To stop bad things from happening to good people. To try and put a dent in it at least, so that others didn't have to go through the same experience she had gone through, that life-altering transition into adulthood that came much too quick. Her pulse raced, her head sprouted beads of sweat. She felt faint. She felt her breath stopping—

"Are you... Okay, agent?"

Chase ignored him, clutched onto the marble veneer bar in the kitchenette.

"Nevermind me, Detective. The other girl needs more attention."

Homicide from the Fifth were already up here and Chase was at first worried they might start a pissing contest, what with Dougherty being out of his jurisdiction and all. But she quickly realized that wasn't the case—in fact the opposite was true: Neither wanted to deal with this dead girl. Especially as the overpowering smell of rotten flesh wafted over everything. She had been sitting there for days.

"Oh, geez," Dougherty said nasally as he held his hand over his nose. "Coulda warned me about the smell."

"Sorry," Chase said through the back of her sinuses. She didn't mind that much—it made her forget the rest of her swirling thoughts for a while.

"So, we canvassed the neighbors," one of the Fifth homicide boys said. "Apparently, they did hear a pretty bad argument three days ago. There was yelling and screaming, they say."

"What did the killer sound like?" Chase asked.

"Male—probably a big dude. Deep booming voice, they said. Made their walls rattle, they said."

"Hmm," Chase said.

"Why, is that strange?"

"Detective, would a large man have to use a ligature to choke someone?"

"Huh?"

"If you look closely at the victim's neck, there's still the imprint there. Looks like a folded piece of smooth material was used. Maybe a necktie. Would someone big and powerful have to use that? Wouldn't they just use their bare hands?" Chase thought back to the murder of Yates which had demonstrated a kind of precision and brute strength she just couldn't feel here.

"Maybe they were in a hurry," the detective said, "or maybe they just panicked and weren't thinking straight."

"Maybe."

Navarro was waiting in the doorway now, standing there in his tweed coat with a sickly green face, to which he had a Kleenex held fast.

"As you can smell, we got a decomp job," Chase said, dispensing with the usual pleasantries. "M.E. on scene says the body's been here three days maybe. The heat of the place probably didn't help."

"The room is unusually warm," Navarro said. "What's up with that?"

"Unknown," Chase said, stepping out of the way. The whole room was packed with cops now—three from the Fifth and their M.E., and the two detectives from the Ninth. They stepped over a tipped coffee table and magazines strewn to the floor face down and muttered inconsistent theories about what happened.

"From the struggle, it's clear this was murder," Navarro said.

"That's not all," Chase replied.

A shadow crossed Navarro's face then, his thin brows criss-crossing. "What do you mean by that, Agent?"

"See for yourself."

Chase knelt down at the body of Jenny Annapolis—she lay with her hands sprawled to both sides, her legs hitched up at the knees, her torso twisted to the right with her lush cherry red hair falling over her porcelain face, blue tinted like a china plate. The striking looks matched the girl in the video almost identically. She was wearing nighttime clothes: A little red number with lace frills on the hem, revealing a body that, while it was still alive, probably stopped some men's hearts—now it was hers that had stopped. Chase crouched down and teased the hair back, revealing the cause of death: Heavy blue bruising on the neck, the imprint of the material used to crush it still marked indelibly into her final skin.

"Ligature, huh?" Navarro said. "Choked the poor bitch out."

And a deluge of spent memories that stung like tears pelted Chase in the face like rain traveling upwards. In spite of her profession, Jenny must have had hopes for the future, maybe even a plan of her own to escape this way of life. Maybe she was planning on going back to school, maybe she wanted to start her own business, maybe she wanted to find the right guy and settle down. She'd been getting through life a day at a time, flaunting her youth, and cashing it out for rent, but all of that vibrant youth had been choked out in an instant, taking along with it a bucket of small dreams and pouring them down the gutter into the East River. The feeling spouted out and soaked Chase's back, draining down her,

raining on the inside.

"We also found this," one of the Fifth homicide boys said, a Detective Brock. He was holding up a bag of suspicious gray powder.

"Dope?"

"Oh yeah. Some prime grade stuff here too, we're not talking crushed up baby powder. We're thinking the girl's pimp was feeding her the stuff, got her nice and docile. We'll have our crime lab try and verify the source of it, but you know how it goes with these things..."

"Her pimp?" Chase said. "Jet Mole didn't seem like he needed to pull that kind of stunt."

"Mole? What? No, his name is Zander Watts."

"Zander—who?"

Chase traded a look with Navarro and Dougherty who seemed equally confused.

"That's not possible, Detective," Chase said. "She was working for Jet Mole last. Brooklyn Heights."

"Not according to this." The detective was holding up a cell phone—a burner. Chase took the phone and quickly went through the texts from a Zander Watts. A flash went through her, shaking Chase to her core.

"The dates," she said, showing the phone back to Brock. "Check the dates. She hasn't done jobs for him in months."

"But they were still in frequent contact."

"Right. But not as a pimp-hooker."

"Okay, so what's going on here?"

"Watts still had his hooks in her maybe," Dougherty said. "It's a common thing with these pimps—they don't let go of a meal ticket so easy. Probably she owed him money, that kind of thing. Girl had an expensive habit there. Probably shot a grand into her arm every month."

Brock nodded. "The nature of the texts would confirm that. Plus her wrists. Acupuncture doesn't do that to your veins. This girl was riding the horse like it

was the New York Derby."

"So the girl's a junkie," Navarro said. "This Zander Watts gets her hooked on the junk, makes her sell herself to pay off the tab. Meanwhile, he makes bank on the H and gets a cut of her profits. Screws her over double."

Brock nodded again. "Girl doesn't like being used. She gets out of dodge, tries shacking up with this Mole instead—after all, only one thing she does well, and she does it lying down..."

"Except her habit goes with her," Dougherty followed. "Maybe she can't get a good connection for the big H. Can only find weaksauce fentanyl with all kinds of crap put into it. She needs the good sauce, the premium dope. Only Zander Watts has the dope. Watts makes her jump through hoops for it..."

"That's it!" Chase said. "That's the connection!"

All three detectives looked at her. "What's that, Chase?" Dougherty asked.

"Maybe she never really "broke from" Watts but only went deep cover into Mole's operation. Mole trusts Annapolis, knows her to be a reliable call girl. He takes her in after she stages a break from Watts—meanwhile, she's still in touch with this parasite pimp on account of he's her dope connect. Annapolis weasels her way into the inner sanctum where she's banging high profile people."

"High profile people that can be blackmailed," Navarro grumbled.

"Exactly," Chase said.

"Okay," Dougherty said. "So, Creg takes Annapolis to the fuckpad in the Bronx. Annapolis tells Watts about it, he bugs the room. Watts figures the connection between Creg and AxeS, figures there's big money there. Two blackmails with one tape. So, he makes the sex tape and uses it to blackmail Yates. Yates hands over the dough. But—"

"Yeah," Chase said. "Doesn't explain why he'd kill the golden goose. Nor does it explain the firing squad that knew about the apartment. We're still missing something. But now we know someone who can tell us the rest."

"I'm on it," Navarro said. "This is Detective Navarro," he called into his radio. "I want an APB put out on a Zander Watts pronto."

Chapter 11

Chase came running out of the building, pressing one finger against her earwig. "Yes, I'm waiting," she replied into the mic, bee-lining to Maddox's Challenger where she rapped on the tinted window. Hearing the door click, she swung it open and slid in.

"Head for Little Italy, go now."

Maddox started the ignition and did as she said, pulling smoothly out onto Madison and heading East.

"Uh huh, uh huh," Chase continued into the earpiece. "Got it."

Maddox side eyed her curiously. "What am I, your freaking Uber? Do you wanna tell me where we're headed in such a hurry?"

"I think I know who the blackmailer is—the guy who made the sex tape."

Maddox's face brightened a little, then darkened as a grin stretched his wide jaw. "How sure are you on this?"

"Eighty percent," Chase said, gripping the roof handle as the car swerved North on Pike, rocketed past a city bus and in between two SUVs. "... If Jenny is the girl from the tape—and judging from her looks, the fact she was in the book, and the fact she was throttled to death over the past few days, I'd say the evidence is strong. If she is the girl then her ex-pimp is the likely blackmailer."

"I'd concur, Agent. But that still begs the question: Where's the pimp now?"

"I got the Bureau to trace a phone number that had been calling her. They were able to ascertain a location. Kenmare and Mulberry—if you could get us there preferably in one piece we could go catch this prick."

"You got it."

The Challenger tore up the asphalt and spewed thick white clouds of exhaust into the windscreens of frustrated day drivers behind them, who swerved out of the way honking in protest at Maddox's out-of-code driving. They hadn't gone very far before a shadow appeared in the rear view. Two shadows in fact. SUVs.

"What the hell?" Chase said, her body locking. "Didn't the cops stop these guys in the Bronx?"

"Nah—apparently they got away," Maddox said, "And now they've brought new friends." He said it matter-of-factly, as if he was explaining that he forgot to buy milk. He stamped on the accelerator and his Dodge Challenger bucked forward, its sheer presence enough to make the drivers in front of them swerve out of the way, honking wildly in retaliation.

Chase touched her earwig and called it in. "We are currently being pursued by two black SUVs heading North on Pike—model is Jeep Cherokee. Requesting interception... Copy that."

"The cavalry's on its way."

"If they can get here on time. Which they won't." He grinned again, sending another shiver up her spine, then his demeanor turned serious. "It's all starting to add up," Maddox grunted. "I shoulda known from those weapons they used up in the Bronx."

"The ARs?"

"Nah. They were freaking—" he took another evasive maneuver onto Henry Street and dodged a truck. "Those were Patriots they were using. POFs."

"I'm not familiar with that model. And, uh, we're headed the wrong way, Agent Maddox..."

"I know that. Just hold onto your butt." Oncoming cars honked as Maddox weaved a tight path up the one-way street past moving steel and parked steel, revving hard, and going up on the curb for a few yards before coming off and then violently cutting onto Rutgers which oriented them North again toward Seward Park, where a string of yellow taxis were all parked in a line waiting for fares.

They'd momentarily lost the tail from their rear view.

"You were saying?" Chase said.

"I was saying—they were POF P-416s. You ever heard of those?"

"No. I thought they were AR-15s."

"It's an AR base but it's not the same gun. These ones were hot."

"As in stolen?"

"As in, there was a batch of them that went missing out of a truck en route to Fort Hamilton like a year ago. The going theory was that the mob took 'em, cocky sons of bitches. And so the fact this pimp's shackled up in Little Italy is probably no coinkidink."

"By which surely you don't mean—"

"Yup. The guy's connected."

"The mob," Chase said dryly.

"You seem skeptical, Agent."

"I am skeptical of the fact that the mob even operates still. It's such an antiquated idea—and the Bureau—"

"That *Bureau* of yours would like to make everyone think they drove the Families extinct. But we both know they didn't quite wipe the plate. The remnants of meatballs are still knocking around all over the place. Here and in Jersey, especially."

Chase clenched her teeth and gripped on as Maddox made another ninety-degree turn West onto Delancey, then, feigning once to confuse the tailing Jeeps, re-righted the car and headed North on Pitt. The Challenger's deep V8 engine roared under Chase's seat and vibrated through her entire body. She found it hard to take Maddox's premise at face value; she'd believed that no real organized crime operated in the city anymore. But when the tinted windows of the SUVs in the rear view glistened as the powerful jeeps sped up toward them, it threw doubt on her belief.

"Look, Chase," Maddox said, still somehow keeping cool in spite of the increasingly large pair of black shadows in the rear view. "Those guns they were using, you don't just drive down to your local sporting goods store and buy them. Who do you think deals in hot guns of that caliber? There's always an organized element."

"Okay," Chase said, her eyes fixed to the mirror and willing their Bureau escort to arrive sooner rather than later. "Organized, sure. But why does that translate to

the mob?"

"Uh, hello? Look around you, Chase," Maddox said, gesturing to the sudden influx of Italian restaurants into view.

"It seems too simple an answer."

"Sometimes, simple is right. Simple just makes sense. Also—doesn't that Bureau of yours even have an Organized Crime division still? Yeah, yeah it does, it's run by that Montana guy."

"Okay, we have an Organized Crime division, and sure, maybe remnants of the old Families are still around, still running things on a minor scale. But Maddox—gun running is not a minor scale. Stealing from the U.S. Military is anything but minor."

"The problem is, you assume the I-tals don't have the cojones to pull something that obscene anymore."

"Maybe."

"Problem is Chase, you're looking at things the wrong way."

Maddox took another violent right turn, then a U-turn straight after, and headed back onto the same road. The two SUVs screeched to a halt, momentarily dazed by the fake out. Chase was amazed by the casual way in which Maddox pulled it off. The Challenger was like an extension of his body—he didn't even seem to break a sweat. When they got some distance in the shadows she asked him.

"So, enlighten me, what's the right way to look at it?"

"It's not really about the old Family ties anymore—hell, maybe it never was for half of them. It's all about the moola. The greenbacks. Those kids that attacked us were hired guns, doesn't really even matter to them if they're working for a mob or not—they're never going to be made men, never going to own territory, never going to have any real power. The structures aren't in play anymore. They're basically pretend mobsters."

"We're agreed on that point," Chase said.

"But that's the thing—they don't need to be real. Things just work differently now. Pretty much anything in this new world of ours is just a shoddy replica of

something that came before. Individualism is the only real driving force—everyone's out for him. But that doesn't mean they don't have a network. It doesn't mean they don't have to cooperate to pull off something big."

"But why the mob, Maddox?"

He shot her a strange look. "Why not? You think blackmailing higher ups with sex tapes is beyond them? Hell, they practically invented that one. It's got their fingerprints all over it."

Chase stopped for a second and dreamily looked out the window at the string of fresh produce stores and tobacco joints and liquor stores rushing past them: Antonio's, De Luca Groceries, Borelli Cigarettes, Trentino's Traditional Sicilian Restaurant...

"Okay, sure. Maybe you were onto something. Maybe this escort racket is tied into the mob and maybe that's why every time we get close some people appear from around a corner to put a bullet in the investigation. But would the mob have the balls to open fire on two government agents? That's the part I'm having trouble swallowing."

"Well, swallow it, Agent," Maddox said, his dark grin returning. "Because it's about to happen again."

Chase glanced in the rear view to see one of the SUVs had disappeared. She swiveled her head around and caught it speeding up to catch up on the left. Something glistened from the pursuing vehicle and a second later a spider's web had formed itself into the window on Maddox's side. The window didn't shatter.

"Bulletproof," Chase said.

"No shit," Maddox said. "You think I drive something straight off the lot? Now hold on, things are gonna get bumpy..." Maddox swung into the SUV, clipping its bumper and sending it swerving off as Maddox himself took a hard left off Avenue C onto Third Street. The SUV quickly righted itself and sped up again, this time with its companion gaining ground on the other side. Chase pulled her Glock 19 from its holster and racked the slide.

"Don't bother," Maddox said, "You'd have to roll down the window to shoot and you'll never outmatch them in firepower."

"Crud," Chase said, suddenly feeling extremely helpless.

They'd somehow made it as far as Little Italy but the last mile would prove the hardest. The car on the left let rip again, sending more cracks into the glass. It wouldn't hold forever. Maddox slammed the Challenger violently into the SUV again but this time it barely budged. They were outmatched—the SUV was too heavy. And now the other SUV coming up on the right body slammed them back, knocking the Challenger off center and the tires squealed as Maddox desperately re-righted them. He suddenly hit the brakes and he and Chase lurched forward in their seats as the car slowed to thirty. He then wrenched the wheel around and made a one-hundred-eighty degree turn right in the middle of the street. Traffic went haywire, honking and swerving around him as he moved, then closing in the hole they'd left after Maddox took off in the opposite direction. The SUVs were trapped now, at least for a dozen seconds or so—a dozen valuable seconds they needed to get the hell out of there.

But they still needed to get to Zander, especially now that their destination might be known by the enemy. Maddox cut another screaming right at the end of the corner and headed after that into a narrow side street that had them coming out on Lafayette and then Crosby. Crosby only had a few cars on the road.

"Fuck it," Maddox said, swinging the car opposite traffic again and heading South. He sped past angry drivers until Spring Street then barreled Southeast until they were right in the heart of Little Italy and reached Kenmare without the SUVs in sight. Chase dried her face with a tissue and took a deep breath as her reckless partner pulled the Challenger into a secluded parking spot.

"See?" He said, still grinning. "Told you I'd get us there in one piece."

"Tell that to my jostled insides."

They practically sprinted to the front of the building on Kenmare and Mulberry—a six-story red brick painted dirty white with a green awning covering the restaurant on the first floor. Chase hit the buzzer for Watts' apartment but they got no reply. A sinking feeling swirled in her guts as she started hitting other apartments until someone answered.

"Hello?" The voice came out squeaky and crackling with static.

"FBI. I need you to buzz us in."

"Oh che cosa! My goodness."

The door buzzed open and they clambered up the stairs to the fourth floor, where the swirling vortex inside Chase grew more and more intense. Her vision started to blur as they approached the door of Zander's apartment, the lights seemed to dim. She pulled her Glock while Maddox had his own Smith & Wesson M&P semi auto at the ready.

"No submachine gun this time?" Chase said dryly, taking another deep breath.

"This one requires a softer touch," Maddox said. They got on either side of the door then Chase rapped on it.

"FBI, open up!"

No answer. She tried again.

"This is the FBI. Zander Watts, open up."

Chase shuddered at the silence that hollered back to them. It was as if she knew what they'd find inside after Maddox drove his boot into the lock and cracked the door open. When they stepped into the silent apartment her fears were confirmed.

There lay Zander Watts, folded over his table, a bullet hole where his face used to be.

Chapter 12

Even though they could find no damning evidence confirming Watts was Creg's blackmailer, there was no doubt in Chase's mind. She felt it the moment she stepped into that apartment: A small little room with a giant screen TV and a leather sofa but not much else in terms of amenities. Big fridge in the kitchen, a series of pots and pans, and cooking implements. The bare signs of life of someone who had been a ghost throughout all of this investigation, and was now a ghost period.

"Well, this is one fine kettle of fish," Maddox grunted, throwing himself onto the sofa and half-closing his eyes out of sheer fatigue. He seemed bewildered, all of that muscular bravado just smacked right out of him. He hadn't predicted this turn of events. How could they? The more they dug into the case the more strings there were behind the scenes. It felt like untangling a giant ball of yarn.

It didn't take long to find it: A computer hidden in Zander's bathroom had what appeared to be the original, unencoded copy of the sex tape. Maddox destroyed it without so much as a second watch through and slapped the dust off his hands like he'd just squashed a bug.

Things seemed even more obvious when they found a burner phone with Yates' number stored on it, a bundle of money with Yates' prints on it under the floorboards, and finally the stolen documents, something about *Wire Fraud Prevention* and the application of *Event Tracking*, whatever that was. The documents were full of convoluted legalese and made very little sense. A quick brush test showed the docs also had Yates' prints on them. It was all so neat and complete. What should have been in that moment a huge success felt to Chase as if the world had just tipped over.

It was exactly what they needed to close the case... And because of that, she didn't buy it.

The NYPD showed up eventually and milled around the room, taking their notes, drinking their coffees, making their usual tasteless comments. Chase was about done with all of it and just felt like she'd been led by the nose, that it was a personal failure on her part Watts now lay here dead. She should have found him

sooner, should have gotten to him before it was obvious what his role was. That would have been the only way to save him—to get there before whoever was behind all this got the chance to pull this total frame job.

Navarro went over the haul. "So, Yates was the one being blackmailed, and he was the one who probably handed over the government documents to Zander."

"Looks like it," Dougherty said.

"You don't seem too happy, Agent," Navarro said. "What's the matter? You getting all weepy over Watts? Guy was scum. Whoever offed him did us a favor—saved the taxpayer a bunch in processing this asshole and keeping him locked up. Now it's all squared away."

"That's just the problem, Detective. Everything's too squared away. It stinks. You're telling me Watts had all this money, had the means to blackmail these guys, and still took his own life? Taking your own life is something you do when you feel like you have no other options."

"I admit that part feels a little shaky, but who knows? Guy was with the mob, it was probably one of them who took him out and made it look like a suicide."

"Then it's a homicide, Detective Navarro."

"Technically, yeah..." His voice trailed off. It was the sign that the NYPD were getting ready to ditch this case to the bottom of a file cabinet for eternity. Chase couldn't let that happen. They hadn't solved this case—they hadn't solved anything. Well, Maddox had completed his mission. But all that did was get Creg off the hook, and for all Chase knew he was part of it too.

"Look, we don't even have evidence that Watts killed Yates," she said. "Just that he was blackmailing him."

"True, that's true," Navarro said. He almost seemed annoyed that she'd reminded him. Like she was harshing his mellow. "Anyway, maybe you should head on home and get some rest, Agent. You look exhausted. We'll wrap up the rest of this and we can continue the investigation. Don't beat yourself up over not getting to this prick in time—no need to regret anything for scum like him."

"It's too late for regret," she muttered under her breath, threading her way through the cops and around the shifted furniture then out the front door.

"But not too late to catch the guy who did it," Maddox said from behind her. Chase turned to him, somewhat annoyed—what was this going to be, another pep talk? That was until she caught the scrap of paper in his hand with something scribbled on it.

"What's that you're holding?"

"I called in a favor and got Kody Meachum's address."

"*Meachum's address?* Agent, I already know his address."

"Not his official address. I'm talking about his safe house on Long Island—where he's all nestled snug as a bug while the law plods around chasing their tails."

She stood there dumbfounded a moment, looking Maddox over.

"Since when do you suspect Meachum?"

"Since the start. Didn't you?"

"But don't you work for the senator?"

"Sure do."

"And doesn't the senator work with Meachum?"

"Sure does."

"But then—you've already destroyed the sex tape, so why are you still helping me?"

He shrugged, his large shoulders making his whole coat shift. "There's no guarantee there aren't more copies out there. I should be thorough." He grinned.

She looked him over again. Suddenly, a wave of relief passed over her and eased the frustration of dealing with the PD. Something in his eyes told her the sex tapes were just a pretext. That he wanted to catch this prick just as much as she did, even if it wasn't his mission.

"Well?" He said. "Don't you suspect him?"

"Of course I suspect him. Zander Watts' death just cleans up the whole thing in way too convenient a way for AxeS. There's no one left to testify since all the

loose ends have been tied off. And I know exactly what's going to happen next—some call is going to come in from up on high telling the PD to back off, that the case is closed already. Meachum won't be implicated at all..."

Maddox nodded, stepped past Chase and down the hall toward the elevator bank.

"Hold on," Chase called after him. "Just like that we're going to head over there?"

"Why not?"

"We don't have a plan, for one thing."

"No point making one yet, plus we don't know how guarded the place will be so there's no way to make one. We Secret Service operate slightly different from you guys. We do our reconnaissance on the job. Adapt to the circumstances in real time."

"Fine, then, let's just go. The smell of bacon around here is starting to give me a headache."

...

Chase switched off her phone as they burned up the NY-24 toward the Hamptons. Maddox caught the move out of the corner of his eye.

"Just making sure I'm not available," she explained. "In case the ASAC gets a sudden urge to take me off the case."

"You feebees," Maddox said, shaking his head. "Always planning ahead."

By the time they made it out to the Hamptons it was already deep in the evening. They took a first drive past the location and caught no signs of life. No mysterious dark cars on the road, no light in the windows. Like most residences in the affluent suburb, each house was cut off from the road by a rich installation of shrubbery, making visibility low. But that would also help as much as hinder. Quietly exiting the challenger, the pair kept low and padded down the sidewalk to the bush, Chase with her Glock 19 pulled and Maddox with his M&P gripped in two sturdy hands. Maddox peered through the gap in the large hedge leading up the driveway, then gave the signal to move forward. They dashed right up the driveway and took cover under the awning in a matter of seconds—then pressing themselves flat against the wall drew in lungfuls of cold January air, recentering

themselves.

Chase had her ears and eyes wide open, the whole ground came into her perception. A few seconds to regain their stamina and then Maddox bolted around the corner with his gun raised and crunched gravel until he made it to the backdoor. Chase followed suit, letting her body stay light and nimble as she covered the distance between herself and her fast-moving partner. Maddox had his ear pressed against the door listening for signs of life. A look of dismay passed over his face.

"What is it?" Chase asked. "Someone in there?"

He shook his head grimly. "The opposite."

She bit her lip, ran through the scenario. "It would make sense. Watts has been taken care of after all. No need for Meachum to hide out here. I guess there's only one way to find out."

"Indeed." Maddox took a step back, screwed a suppressor onto the barrel of his M&P, and aimed the shot.

"Hold on," Chase said, "You're just gonna—"

The gun made a *pshuut* sound and a chunk of the oak door blew off into splinters. The heavy scent of saw dust hung in the air as Maddox yanked the door open and they entered the room.

"Clear," Maddox grunted, passing quickly through the suave fitted kitchen and through into the elegant dining room with its polished ornaments and wide oval walnut dining table. Expensive looking watercolors hung on the wall. "Clear." A few more ostentatious rooms and it was first floor clear. The stillness in the place was damning. Chase already knew they wouldn't find anyone on the second floor, but after Maddox tiptoed up there and hustled his way down the hall opening each room, she was surprised to see him walking back looking dejected.

"Nobody's home?" She said.

"Nobody's home," Maddox replied. "With one caveat."

"What?"

"Someone got here first."

Chase dashed up the stairs and checked in the first room—it had been ransacked. Clothes lay strewn across the floor, the bed covers had been thrown back, the drawers emptied onto the floor.

"Crud," she said. "Who the hell else would come here?"

Maddox was staring off into the distance out the bay window on the West side, as if trying to listen for something.

"Agent Maddox?"

"Yeah," he finally said.

"It doesn't add up—why just the second floor? The first floor was immaculate."

"Yeah. Stinks, don't it?"

"Maddox—I have a feeling it was Meachum himself that did this, probably through one of his staff."

He turned back to her wearing a curious expression. "He trashed the place *himself*?"

"Like maybe it was some kind of evidence he wanted to get rid of. Maddox—what if he was the one behind the sex tape? What if he was the one feeding Annapolis heroin?"

"That doesn't—why?"

"Think about it. Meachum had a little quid pro quo thing going with the senator, but that wasn't real power. If he had dirt on the senator, *that's* real power. It makes more sense this way, if he was behind it all along. He uses Zander to control Annapolis—explains how a low level pimp like Zander had such high grade dope. It even explains why Yates had to die—he was standing in the way of the operation by going against it. Maybe he even figured out that Meachum was behind it. So Meachum gets an assassin to take him out."

"And the gunmen?"

"He either hired them or Meachum himself is connected to the same syndicate."

"Hmm," Maddox said, an amused expression on his face. "You went from not believing the mob even exists to fingering Meachum as a secret mobster in the

span of a couple hours."

"What can I say? It's been a long two hours."

"But Chase, if that's true then we're boned. There's no evidence left to prove anything."

"Let's just search the place anyway, hope he got careless and left something behind. Adapt to circumstances— isn't that what you Secret Service men do best?"

"Sure."

They turned the place upside down, yanking out drawers, throwing open closets, moving furniture, and searching for hidden compartments in the floor or walls— Maddox looking for any hard drives or discs that might contain further copies of the sex tape, Chase looking for anything that could tie Meachum to the murders, to Annapolis, to Zander, or the mob. But their search was cut short by a sound from outside. Chase drew her gun and darted over the landing to the top of the stairs, peered around, and got the front door in her sights. The door burst open and three cops walked in—not city cops, locals.

"Alright, you punks," their leader barked, cold greedy eyes locked behind the sights of a Remington police shotgun. "Get out here with your hands up if you know what's good for you."

...

Chase and Maddox found themselves getting transported to the local cop shop in the back of a squad car.

"Must have been a silent alarm," Maddox muttered.

"Well, we weren't being too inconspicuous when we went in there with our guns out," Chase replied. "Some nosy neighbor probably—"

"Quit your yammering," the blue suit in the passenger seat said from in front of the grill separating them. "You'll have plenty of time to talk after we throw you in the slammer."

"I'm FBI, you imbecile," Chase retorted. "I showed you my badge."

"Yeah, well, that don't get you off the hook for breaking into someone's home,

now does it? I don't see a warrant, do you, Officer?"

"I don't see nothing at all, boss. Just two people who think they're above the law."

"Hmph. Ain't it always the truth with these federal types? Government overreach, I call it."

"You sound like the liquor store owner," Chase muttered.

"What was that?"

She slumped back in her seat. It was pointless to argue with them, that much was obvious. They were red tape junkies who spent their life handing out tickets and booking people for jaywalking. They had no possible idea what an epic clusterfuck of a scandal they'd stumbled onto. The car slowly took them back to the county police station, where Chase gave her statement and was then thrown into a small hard room. After a couple of hours in the freezer, Chase was almost glad to catch the scent of ASAC Hogan's cologne. Thirty seconds later, she saw his wide mug come into view. He didn't look overly pleased.

"ASAC Hogan, I can explain—"

"Nevermind, Chase," he said, nodding to the blue suit who opened the white barred doors. "I'm not going to ask why you felt the need to go ransack a highly respected businessman's home without a warrant, nor why you had your phone off—"

"My battery was—"

"I said I'm not gonna ask. But from hereon you follow orders, got that?"

Chase chewed her lip and looked Hogan in the eye, tried to glean some information, figure out where he was coming from on this. He wouldn't be so easy on her unless there was a reason. She couldn't read him at all. Shrugging, she walked out of the cell, looking around the hallway.

"Forget about Agent Maddox, if that's who you're looking for. He's already been dismissed."

"Dismissed?"

"Reassigned. This case doesn't require his services any longer."

Hogan gestured to follow her. They drove down to the Ninth Precinct, and upon entering the station and being led to the interrogation room, she was stunned to find Meachum's bodyguard, Jack Armstrong, sitting there talking to Detectives Navarro and Dougherty. On the table was a plastic evidence bag, containing a long hunting knife.

So that was it. That was why ASAC Hogan had gone so easy on her. Here was the next step in tying everything off to an easy solution: Meachum's patsy. All tied up in a neat little bow. Chase wanted to puke. It was so obvious.

"I keep telling you that's not mine!" Armstrong was saying in a hoarse, broken voice.

"Why's he talking like that?" Chase said disinterestedly.

"Apparently, he got his voice box smashed in the war," Hogan said.

On the other side of the one-way window, Navarro smirked at the suspect, folded his arms. "Give up the routine, Jack. We found traces of blood on the blade. Blood matching none other than Clyde Yates. And your prints are on the handle so don't give me that crap. Let's just save ourselves the crap. We also got your prints all over the Annapolis girl's apartment. That's double homicide, bucko. You're looking at a long leisurely stretch down the river. If you're gonna cop a plea it's now or never."

"No freaking way," Chase muttered. "So, this is how they're gonna play it."

"What was that?" Hogan asked.

"ASAC, how did they even catch him? I don't understand..."

"Turns out that little stunt you two pulled gave us a break—which is why I'm not going to reprimand you for acting out. This time."

"Hold on a minute, ASAC," Chase said. "I don't understand—we didn't *find* the murder weapon at Meachum's place."

"No, you didn't. But your actions seemed to spook the bodyguard. After he caught two government agents snooping around the safe house, he rushed back to his apartment. And our men who had been tailing him caught him trying to dump the knife."

"Jesus. Why the hell did he even hold onto it?"

ASAC Hogan shrugged. "Souvenir, a trophy. It had sentimental value. Or he was too cautious about getting caught dumping it. Whatever the reason, he screwed up. And now we have Yates' killer and Jenny Annapolis' killer."

Chase ran over the new development in her head. But no matter how she slotted it, it didn't fit.

"This is insanity. I don't buy it for a minute."

"You were the one who said it had to be someone powerful and with probable weapons training who killed Yates, Chase."

"Yes but—come on. You expect me to believe that after days of inaction Jack Armstrong makes such an amateur mistake? He had all the time in the world to ditch that knife."

Hogan just glared back at her and said nothing for a moment or two, conveying the message that she needed to let it go. "Chase, it was Armstrong, case closed. As of now, the FBI is ceasing involvement in the murder of Clyde Yates. That's why I came to collect you personally. Now, are you going to follow orders?"

She sighed, knowing that when Hogan got like this it was pointless to argue. Someone was already putting pressure on him, just like she predicted. "I'll follow orders," she told him. But what she didn't tell him was which orders she meant to follow.

Chapter 13

She would follow her original orders: To solve this case. Not just who killed Yates, but why. Evidence from Zander's apartment seemed to paint a pretty clear picture on that, but she still wasn't convinced. It was too neat, too straightforward, and it didn't include all the players involved. Was she just supposed to buy the fact that Meachum knew nothing about this from start to finish? That he didn't notice Yates' behavior, or that money was disappearing from their accounts? The whole thing stunk like last month's quesadilla. But how would she prove otherwise? Maddox was gone now—she didn't have any way to contact him. She was all on her own. It almost surely was Armstrong who was the murderer. But conspiracy to commit murder was a felony charge too. Why would Armstrong act alone? He was just a bodyguard. And it struck her as entirely bizarre how the murder weapon had turned up like that—especially given Armstrong's outraged reaction to it. Like it had been a surprise. A nasty surprise dumped on him at exactly the right time.

That could only mean one thing: Someone had planted the weapon. He'd been set up to take the fall. Armstrong was not only the real murderer, but also Meachum's patsy.

But how to prove it? Without hard evidence this was all just conjecture. She had just one shot left, a Hail Mary.

"I don't know about this, Agent," Dougherty said when he heard Chase explain this. "The evidence is shaky at best."

"Right. On its own, it's not enough. That's why I need your help."

"What can I do?"

"Act as a witness. I'm going to wear a wire, confront Meachum with what I found."

"In other words, your bet is that he'll hang himself. It's a tall order, Agent Chase."

"Maybe, but right now that's the only play we have left."

"Okay Chase, if that's how you want to play it, sure. I think this whole thing stinks too. But just one thing—if your theory is correct then this guy is a killer. You're going to have to be extremely careful."

"Don't worry, Detective. I've got my own secret weapon."

...

Meachum was in his office sitting in his chair as if the game was already set. He wanted to gloat, and that had been the ticket to Chase riding that awful elevator back up here.

"Good to see you again, Agent Chase. I hope this will be our last encounter."

"It will be. But it'll also be the last time you look out on that skyline."

"Oh?" He said, amused, a thin eyebrow rising on his head. His face stretched with a shit-eating grin.

"See, Meachum, you weren't as smart as you thought. You may have turned your safe house upside down but you still left a key piece of evidence behind."

"Did I?" He said, still grinning. But something flickered behind the grin—the gears were whirring behind his blue, piercing eyes. The calculations had started and he had begun to doubt himself. This much was good. This much was as Chase planned it.

"You see, Meachum, I know you were behind all of this. It was you who instructed Armstrong to kill Yates. It was you who held onto the murder weapon, and it was you who planted it in his apartment at the right moment for him to get caught."

He shrugged passively. "A fine tale. But that's not evidence of anything. It's your own little story."

"I'm not done yet," she said, her tone firmer. She heard the gears turning in his mind some more. "I also know you were the one supplying Watts the horse."

He scoffed. "Ridiculous. And here I thought you'd entertain me for a while. It seems bringing you up here was misguided." He went to hit his intercom.

"You slipped up, Meachum," Chase said, and Meachum's finger hovered in the air above the button. She knew from the look on his face that she only had one

chance left and this conversation was over. The next accusation had to hit his battleship. She loaded it up and got ready to fire...

All of the elements of the case spun through her mind at lightspeed—Yates, Espinoza, Mole, the apartment, Maddox, Annapolis, Watts. Annapolis was connected to the senator. Mole and Watts connected to Annapolis. The gunmen connected to who? Who was in those SUVs? Who?!

"It was your gunmen—that's what gave you away," Chase said confidently. Meachum froze, his outstretched finger began to shake. Imperceptibly, but it was there. This was it. This was the smoking gun. A literal gun. A patriot's gun.

"You see, I took out one of your men and Agent Maddox took out two. Maybe if it was just one of them we'd hit, maybe then it would have went overlooked. But three? Come on, Meachum. The men are a paper trail of flesh and blood. All three are in the system—only traces of them, sure. But that trace leads all the way back to you."

A bead of sweat leaked its way down Meachum's face. Here was the finishing blow.

"The same gunmen killed Zander Watts, Meachum. They planted that evidence at his apartment. Which means you planted it. You had the documents all along, and you made them disappear to put pressure on the senator to cover this up. But it backfired, didn't it Meachum? It caused a rift between you two. And that's why the senator pointed me in the right direction."

Meachum was quivering visibly now. His hand pulled back slowly from the intercom and slipped limply down.

"The senator made me a deal. He told me all about your—"

"That's enough," Meachum said, pulling a silver Jennings J-25 pistol out from under his desk. "You've gone too far, Agent. You should have stayed in your lane. But no, you had to stick your nose in business outside your pay grade. Well, too bad, because now you have to be cleaned up too, just like Watts and that whore. Curiosity killed the—"

BANG. Meachum's eyes opened one last frosty blue time and he fell down slumped on his desk. Just the way they'd found Watts.

And from out of the corner, Secret Service Agent Peyton Maddox got up and strolled over to where Chase stood with the dead man.

"I've always hated rich stiffs," Maddox said. "They all think they're above the law."

Chapter 14

In a cool, empty office, rain dripped through the blanket of smoke outside. Hard, heavy, January rain.

"Yes," ASAC Hogan was saying into the telephone in his office, sitting there in the dim light, his cigar on the edge of the crystal ashtray sending smoke signals up to the ceiling. "Things have been wrapped up pretty neatly."

"You were right to put that lady agent of yours on this. She managed to clean things up in just the right way. Meachum was too out of control. I had been meaning to take care of him for a while..."

"Is it fair to say this regrettable event won't delay the necessary legislation?"

"It is. The SET program has been hindered for too long. It's about time the law enforcement in this country acquired the ability to stand up to a new kind of technologically literate criminal."

"I thoroughly agree," Hogan said, smiling as he stared out at the darkening Manhattan sky. "We've been grasping at straws for too long using the hand-me-downs from 911."

"And have you found anyone suitable yet?"

"Oh, I have the man for that, don't worry. Hell, the poor guy has been trying to wrestle with an underpowered prototype of the SET for a decade now, not even realizing that in its present form it's not capable of one iota of what it was designed for. He's pushed the current platform to its limit. God only knows what he could achieve once we get real... *Access*."

"Perfect. Then I will let you make arrangements through the necessary channels. We can expect the new law to go into effect as soon as the fall."

"And it's going to be... *Discreet*?"

"Don't worry at all, Hogan. No one will have any idea about the Wire Fraud Prevention bill's true significance. AxeS made sure of that."

"Thank you."

"No, Hogan, thank you. Then are you ready to go ahead as planned?"

"Absolutely, *Mr. Senator.*"

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